

Speaking Out

Psalm 118:15-25

Acts 5:27-32

Nelson Mandela appreciated the irony. Threatened with imprisonment, and having already gone to prison four times, in 1961 he traveled secretly around South Africa. Meeting undercover with reporters, and also with leaders of Spear of the Nation (a guerrilla group that used violence to pursue political ends), Mandela disguised himself as a chauffeur. Driving a white man. Who happened to be an old neighbor from a posh suburb of Johannesburg. Mandela actually came from a tribal royal family. Now here he was, playing the black underling, going around to plan strikes and bombings and all sorts of civil unrest. After making his grand tour without getting arrested, he went to a pan-African conference as a representative of the African National Congress. Upon his return to South Africa the police arrested him. In 1996 a former diplomat named Donald Rickard revealed the CIA had used his embassy as a base from which to plot the arrest. Mandela would spend the next twenty-eight years in various prisons, including the notorious Robben Island.

During those long years Mandela rethought his earlier advocacy for the use of violence as a tool to force change. Whereas before he had studied Marx and Lenin and trained in covert tactics, now he reverted to an even earlier appreciation of Ghandi and Jesus. He responded positively to overtures from Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a

staunch advocate of non-violent tactics. Mandela wrote letters to the public his lawyers smuggled out of prison beneath false lids in the crowns of their hats. Throughout his long public career he spoke out, disregarding the consequences. By the time of his release in 1990, he had (his word) *converted* to the path of peaceful protest. His departure from prison was broadcast around the world. This time riding in the back of an open car, he and his wife waved to the throngs that lined the road to Cape Town's City Hall. There he gave a speech that included this quote: "The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

The Apostle Peter had also already served time when he challenged the high priest and the council with what we just read. The high priest snarls, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." Let us unpack this. "We" refers to the Sadducees, who under the Herods became the party of priests responsible for running the Temple and its worship services. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. They found no support for the concept in the Old Testament law, and having been deeply affected by the Greek school of stoicism, they denied that our souls live on after dying to this world, either in bliss or in punishment. Geoffrey Bromiley, author of the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, writes, "In (the Sadducees') view, the present world is the place of the one encounter with God and the related reward and punishment." For them, Peter's first and greatest offense is claiming that Jesus of Nazareth has come back from the dead.

His next offense is implicating the Sadducees in Jesus' death on the cross. They feel he deserved it. They do not feel they bear any guilt for it. They and their rivals, the Pharisees, have done what had to be done. Just a week earlier the entire city had thronged to welcome this rube from Galilee as he rode into town on an ass. People were speculating he might be the Messiah. Day after day he taught radical interpretations of the Law and the Prophets *in their precious Temple*. Somebody had to take him down. They did it. Now here come his ragtag band of followers with their twangy Galilean accents, claiming he has risen from his grave. The Sadducees hoped killing him would put an end to his movement. The Herods hoped the same, as did the Roman governor. But these people just will not shut up.

Peter knows what he says will get him in serious trouble. Yet he has to do God's will, not that of the power brokers of Jerusalem. He doubles down on both his prior claims, that the Sadducees share the blame for Jesus' crucifixion and that he subsequently rose from the dead. He says "The God of our fathers raised Jesus whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." He adds an additional point sure to irritate the Sadducees. They run the Temple. They administer its primary function, performing sacrifices on the high altar *for the forgiveness of sins*. They're in charge of forgiveness. God's law has told them how to make it happen. The Spirit of the Lord had caused that law to be written. Case closed.

But Peter has even more to say: "And we are witnesses to these things, and so

is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” The Holy Spirit and the Spirit of the Lord are one and the same. Peter claims the very authority the Sadducees understand to have given them their duties and their power. He says it has given him a new revelation. And that revelation unseats the Sadducees, making them irrelevant to the process of repentance and forgiveness. No wonder the next verse tells us, “When they heard this they were enraged and wanted to kill them.”

Peter knows all this will happen before he opens his mouth the first time. Yet he speaks. Nelson Mandela did the same. Mumsnet is a website “by parents for parents”. A recent post came from a reader who shared that her parents had abused her repeatedly during her childhood. Nothing sexual or physical, but abuse all the same. She had gone to a therapist about it, and after a number of sessions began to feel the need to speak to them about it. The thought of confronting them terrified her. But she felt she could never heal emotionally if she did not do it. She set up a meeting with them without telling them why. She had not seen them face to face for years, so after the hellos her father said, “Why are we here?”

“So I can tell you I have finally found the strength to talk to you about how much you hurt me when I was little,” she replied. They claimed they’d done nothing wrong. She was the black sheep in the family, but they were quite sure she’d had a perfectly lovely childhood. Her therapist had prepared her for this. So she gave them three examples of them belittling her with specific quotes from each of them. She recounted excessive and cruel punishments. She reminded them of how they would promise her

a reward—a trip to an amusement park was one specific example—only to deny it once she had behaved in accordance with their requirements. She wrote that she started crying almost as soon as she started speaking, but that she got all the way through her prepared script.

Times come when we must speak. Sometimes we must share bad news. Sometimes we can share good news. But we so often allow fear to prevent us from speaking. Some of us blurt out anything no matter what the potential risk might be. A member of this congregation has smilingly described themselves to me as “a blurter”. Others allow the slightest risk to silence them. Add in the conditioning most of us received as children never to speak of politics and religion and we find very few of us willing to speak the Good News to a world desperately in need of hearing it. And we can identify two additional reasons we do not often talk about Jesus. The first is that whereas many intentionally use social media to make political comments, far fewer choose to comment there on their faith. The second reason for our quietness about our faith is we are Presbyterians. We just do not do that.

The Gallup organization has conducted religion polls annually since the 1950's. From their data we learn that Presbyterians are the second-most educated tribe of Christians, trailing only the Episcopalians. If as a denomination we are so educated, why can we not think up a way to speak up about Jesus Christ, and him crucified and resurrected? It may strike some as a bit of a jarring transition to go immediately from the Episcopalians to Hall of Fame football coach Vince Lombardi, but here we go.

One of Lombardi's maxims was, "Always run to your strength." He liked to boast that his teams had run the same play in the same way for decades, but nobody could stop it. Called simply "Sweep Left" or "Sweep Right", he believed it succeeded for two reasons: they practiced until they ran it perfectly every time, and they drafted players who would be good at it.

If the Presbyterian strength is education, why not run that play? Do you have friends with young children? Tell them about our Sunday school curriculum and dedicated teachers—many of them school teachers as well. Tell others of our thoughtful adult classes on Sundays and Thursdays. We run our plays pretty well, and we have players formed in the mold to make it happen.

If we can learn to speak in an educated way—yet with humility and the willingness to listen if others want to share their versions of the Good News—we have nothing to fear. Jesus himself told his followers the Holy Spirit would give them the words they needed. I do not advocate forcing the question, or trapping people into hearing our witness, like that couple last week who started singing Christian songs in the center aisle of an airplane. I do advocate that we try to allow the Spirit to move us to speak when it is appropriate. Think and pray about whether to speak, and if so led, when and what to say. Trust that God will in fact give you the words. Peter did—and he helped get off the ground the very movement in which we participate this morning: the Christian Church. What might we accomplish, if much smaller yet no less important? Speak up.