

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ
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Acts 5:27-41

Gamaliel's Principle

In the first century in Palestine there was little separation between church and state. In fact, the state recognized certain gods and not others. Also, the state, the Roman Empire, bestowed upon their emperor that status of a god. We have found engravings on coins and building ruins which claim that Caesar was “son of God.” You can find stories of miracles performed by government leaders and virgin births. All in all it was a very different time from our time over two thousand years ago in the place we now call the Holy Land.

In order to keep the peace, the government would recognize other religions and give them some restricted sense of governance over their own people. This is why there was a Jewish Sanhedrin, or governing council of Jewish people. On the Sanhedrin sat leaders of the local religious/political establishment. I say “religious/political” establishment because that is what they were. Politics and the marbling of civic and religious rule and keeping the order were all part of the duties of the governing religious authorities. Can you imagine if there was a group of pastors who were responsible to the government leaders for maintaining peace and control in Almaden Valley and any individual could be brought before the local religious governing council to account for his or her theological and civic violations of peace and decorum? Can you imagine what it would be like if the religious perspective of the governing theocracy of Almaden Valley was one that was in opposition to your most cherished moral and religious ideas. And let’s say the local governing religious council could restrict certain kinds of public speech, choose who people could have loving relationships with, chose where you had to send your children to schools and what theology they had to study in their textbooks, restricted what you could eat and drink and when you slept and when you awoke? What if? I think I would be safe to say that whether or not you consider yourself theological or political liberal or conservative you would not like living under theocratic rule, even if that theocratic rule had to answer to a secular ruling government of domination and oppression.

Well, welcome to the first century world of a new group of people, call The People of the Way, or later to be called “Christians” and follower of

Jesus Christ. In our passage from the Acts of the Apostles this morning we find Peter and a group of people who follow Jesus' teachings about how we should live our lives standing before the Sanhedrin, the local theocratic governing body beholden to the Roman Empire and responsible for keeping the peace and maintaining "safe" boundaries of behavior.

This is an amazing scene. This radical group of renegade Jewish brothers and sisters are continuing to preach the gospel of a person recently executed by the Roman government. They come right and say that God's law is more important than Caesars'! They accuse the local theocratic governing body of being in cahoots with the Romans who executed their leader and they say this to the faces of the religious leaders. (Remember they are not accusing the Jewish population in general, but rather specifically the theocratic leaders.) And they claim that these leaders of the people of Israel need to repent for their sins. Can you imagine how angry the local theocratic leaders would be? Can you imagine how fearful the theocratic leaders would be that if they let this radical fringe group go any further their authority and power may be taken away by the Romans? Not only would the theocrats be hopping mad, but they would be out of their living minds with fear! In fact much of what they do they do out of fear. A fear of loss of power, a fear of loss of their economic and class privileges, a fear of loss of status within the community, and in the end a fear for their own lives—they've seen the crosses outside the gates of the city reserved for those who failed to tow the line of the empire.

In the midst of all this consternation and argument and fear in walks Gamaliel, who we read from Acts is "a teacher of the law, respected by all the people." (Acts 5:34). Gamaliel stands us and "orders" that Peter and the followers of Jesus should go out into the hallway for a short while. Who is this guy? Who is this guy who can "order" the Sanhedrin to stop what they are doing and listen to him? From the JewishEncyclopedia.org we read that Gamaliel was a grandson of one of the most respected and still well-know rabbinic teacher of the time, Hillel. Interesting enough, he was also the son of a man named Simon and, of course, what name did Peter have before he became Peter...yes, Simon. I'm sure Simon was a very common name but it makes for nice irony doesn't it? The JewishEncyclopedia.org also states that "Like his grandfather, Hillel, he was the originator of many legal ordinances with a view to the "tikkun ha-'olam" (= "improvement [or repair] of the world". Read more at:

<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=51&letter=G#ixzz0j1c5r22G>.) This was a man who was a wise, respected, and powerful leader of

the Jewish people. He spent much of his life thinking about how we humans can work with God to repair a broken world.

So, Gamaliel stands up. He stands up and urges the Sanhedrin to slow down a bit. Take a breath, think about it. He might as well be saying stop talking out of fear and trepidation and use a little reason. He recites the story of a couple of other wayward radicals who had followers and after they were taken out of the picture their followers just simply scattered to the wind, disappeared and their influence and radical ways with them. He asking the Sanhedrin to remember and reason and stop acting out of fear. And then he makes a most profound statement. Gamaliel says “I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; ³⁹but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!” In other words, if some idea is from God it will grow and thrive, but if it is not it will wither and die. Or, you could put it this way, “let’s wait and see” what happens.

Now, one could argue that Gamaliel showed great wisdom on that day before the Sanhedrin and the Sanhedrin, when they came to their senses, and acted out of rationality rather than out of fear made the right decision. Rather than jumping to conclusions they acted with wisdom, patience, and you might say with faith. Of course, the result was that the followers of Jesus Christ continued to grow and prosper and now, thousands of years later number in the millions, as do people of the Jewish faith. Waiting worked out pretty good for both sides.

But is it always the case that when faced with a tough decision that we should just wait and see? Look what happened with Neville Chamberlain who took a “wait and see” attitude toward Hitler? Look what happens in the case of some disease when people take a “wait and see” attitude? So, trusting that being patient and waiting will reveal whether or not something of God’s doing or not can be a risky venture.

But there are those times and issues that waiting and being patient are the better side of wisdom. I think the main point of Gamaliel’s principle that we should adhere to in many of life’s decisions is that we should not make our decisions based on our fears. I would add to that bit of wisdom that making decisions out of guilt are usually short-sighted, too. Acting through fear and guilt or greed and guile I would argue are not the purview of witnessing to God’s reign. Within God’s reign, or God’s kingdom, which is alive within us if we only work to listen to it, there are attributes like wisdom, patience, generosity, love, forgiveness, mercy and sharing abundance which are far better places from which to make the important

decisions of your life. Frankly, I believe those are also critical attributes for leaders of any time and organization to make important decisions. Having said that, there are moments of where we are trying to stem the tide of injustice and oppression where patience and a “wait and see” attitude are not always correct courses. But as we try to join Gamaliel in finding ways to live out *tikkun ha-'olam*, helping to repair the wounded of the world or repair our own personal wounds, let us use the powers of discernment that we have been given and act from that place rather than from our fears or our guilt. Amen.

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