

# "Worthy To Suffer"

Acts 5:29-42

May 1, 2011

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Of Easter

We like to be liked. That's a simple fact of life. There's nothing wrong with this per se. To be liked is a good thing. On the other hand, we do not like to be disliked. We consider that always to be a bad thing. If we are disliked or even rejected, we will do almost anything to change that. We will change how we act. We will change what we say.

Easter seems to be a time when many people like us in the Church. Churches were full last Sunday. We have an exciting message to share with people. God loves us and all people totally and unconditionally. Through Jesus' death on the cross, He has earned fully and complete forgiveness for any and every sin of all people past, present, and the future. This has been ratified by His Son's bodily resurrection from death to life. Now, He now gives repentance and faith to believe this. He freely gives that forgiveness through the Word of God, baptism, and Holy Communion. Life after death in the perfect peace and jubilant joy of heaven is now given.

I can remember when I was a young boy who wanted to be a pastor. I thought it would be a great job to tell people about Jesus. After all, who wouldn't want forgiveness and everlasting life? We think that if we just share this message – preach this Gospel – then people will come flocking to our church. Our church will grow numerically and financially. God will find us worthy to be granted success.

But what so often happens? People often don't like us when we share the Gospel. We are rejected by those who don't want to be told about their sin. We receive apathetic responses from people who simply assume that God loves them no matter what they do or that there are many other equally fine spiritual options. Jesus is not all that crucial. Therefore, people do not flock to our churches as we hoped they would. We don't always see numerical or financial growth. We become discouraged.

If you think we have it bad, just look at what happened to the apostles of Jesus Christ. They were eyewitnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. They were probably more excited than we are to proclaim this message. Being so close to the events of this message, they probably had greater expectations for results. Since they lived in a religious country – a nation which was expecting the Messiah to come, they probably figured their message would make them hugely popular among the people and totally accepted by the leaders.

But what happened? Just prior to our text, we find that their eager evangelism efforts earned for them a night in prison. After God freed them from prison, they were once again hauled before the religious leadership, publicly rebuked and criticized for preaching the Gospel message. At the end of our lesson, they were publicly flogged, commanded to stop preaching in the name of Jesus, and sent on their way.

When what we say makes us disliked and when what we stand for causes us to be rejected, there is always the temptation to change our message and compromise our actions. Maybe if we didn't talk about the Law of God so much, that would make people like us. The Law is such a negative thing. Better yet, let's change the Law of God so that it no longer condemns our actions but actually condones them. It's easy to be critical of the ELCA when it changed God's law regarding sexual behavior, but changing or compromising God's Law is something we've all done when it comes to our pet sin. We ignore God's Law or seek to change it if it can justify our behavior. Maybe it's God's Law about heterosexual behavior, divorce, the Sabbath Day, and so on. We want to be free to interpret God's Law so that it doesn't condemn us. People will like that.

Some would say that we shouldn't talk so much about sin. Talk only about God's love. That is a more positive message. Talk about sin just makes people feel guilty. (Of course, that's what it is supposed to do.) If we don't talk about sin but only talk about love, then people will like us more.

Maybe we should compromise our view on Christ and salvation. People don't like it when you tell them that their way to salvation is wrong or that Jesus is the only way of salvation. Let's talk

about Jesus a lot, but let's not be so dogmatic about Him being the only way. If we are more sensitive and inclusive in our testimony about Jesus, then people will probably be more accepting of us.

Let's just change our confession or compromise our behavior so that we don't offend anyone. Let's be politically correct and non-offensive. People will like us. They will listen to us. Hopefully, they will join us. We'll have more people in church and we won't have such financial problems.

Is that what Peter and the apostles did? Not at all! After they were commanded to not preach the Gospel and after they had cooled their heels in prison for an evening, they were not politically correct or inoffensive at all. Peter said, "We must obey God rather than men."

They didn't compromise their message one bit. Peter's message was straightforward and rather blunt: He said, "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." In other words, Peter was saying to the most religious men of the land, "YOU are responsible for Jesus' death by your sins. Yet Jesus died and rose again. Through His action and His action alone, God gives your repentance so that you might see your sin and be sorry and then God gives you forgiveness. It is all Him. It is not you."

What is going on here? Is Peter crazy? Doesn't he know this is going to get him into trouble? Doesn't he realize that such brash language is not going to help his church grow there in Jerusalem? Doesn't he care?

Peter was simply remaining faithful to His Lord's command and faithful to His Lord's message. He likely remembered His Lord's words about the reaction such faithfulness would bring. We think that preaching the Gospel faithfully will cause people to like us and bring us outward success. We also think that, if we are not experiencing numerical success or people do not like us, then we are doing something wrong.

Jesus says that things are just the opposite. Jesus warned His disciples that acceptance and success may actually be a sign of unfaithfulness. He said, "Woe to you when everyone speaks well

of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.” (Luke 6:26) On the other hand, saying exactly what Jesus wants us to say and doing exactly what Jesus wants us to do may make people not like us or reject us. Jesus said, ““Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matt. 5:11-12)

So that’s exactly what Peter and the other apostles did. They didn’t shut up or compromise their message. They rejoiced that people insulted and persecuted them for their faithfulness. Instead of complaining about not being liked or not being worthy enough to be rewarded by God for their efforts, they rejoiced that they were counted worthy by God to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus. They considered it to be a badge of honor.

This can be our attitude as well. We live in a time that is as hostile to Christianity as the time of the apostles. While we don’t want to be unloving, obnoxious, or aloof as witnesses to Jesus Christ (there is no excuse for that), we are freed from having to worry about being liked or having our message accepted. We are called to be faithful for it is the clear teaching of God’s Law in all of its severity and the pure teaching of the Gospel in all of its sweetness through which God has given us repentance, brought us to faith, and granted us forgiveness of sin and everlasting life. It is the only way for others to receive these same gifts. There are no short cuts. There are no compromises.

If we are disliked or rejected by others for accurately and unashamedly presenting the Word of God, we are blessed by Jesus. Rather than look at this as a negative, we can it as a positive. God has deemed us worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of Jesus. Instead of being sad or depressed, we can actually rejoice and be glad as Jesus says for great is our reward in heaven. Instead of being pressured into shutting up or compromising the message, we can follow the example of the apostles. After their experience, they did not cease preaching and teaching Jesus, but continued to do it every day in the temple and from house to house. So, too, we will not cease preaching and teaching Jesus,

regardless of the reaction. We will all the more proclaim that message within these walls and unabashedly bring that message to our neighborhoods and communities.

Sometimes, you hear about diets which promise you great weight loss without having to exercise and with the privilege of eating all of the foods you want. Aren't you suspicious of such plans? We realize that faithfulness of a diet means the rejection of fattening foods and the acceptance of often painful exercise. Yet, for those who are serious about weight loss, such sacrifices are willingly accepted for the sake of the long term goal of weight loss.

In the same way, when we hear of plans to share the Gospel in which there is no painful rejection and everyone will like us, Jesus warns us that this is the way false prophets have always been received. Being faithful to the Word of God often means not being liked and being the recipients of ridicule and persecution. Yet we willingly accept these things for a great and glorious goal: the retention of our salvation and the reception of that salvation by others. Let us, therefore, rejoice and be glad whenever we are counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. It is the only way. Amen.