

The Wisdom of Gamaliel

Acts 5:27-42

April 28, 2019

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Jesus. Judas. Peter. Mary. Pontius Pilate. James. John. Mary Magdalene. Caiaphas. Thomas. All familiar names in the events leading up to Easter and in weeks and months following the resurrection. We can locate these individuals in the story. Some of them have even become part of our cultural lexicon. For example, non-Christians sometimes call someone who has betrayed them a “Judas,” because the traitorous behavior of Judas Iscariot is so well known. The phrase “doubting Thomas” is also common. We have all identified with some or all of these characters at some point in our own journey to relationship with Christ.

Gamaliel...not so much. I have read the Bible in its entirety a couple of times, and I surf around in it on a daily basis, but until Easter 2019 Gamaliel hadn't made much of an impression on my brain. I couldn't have told you where his story was in the Bible or what he had done that was noteworthy. He just isn't one whom we have looked at much – and not only here at St. Matthew, I don't remember ever hearing a Bible story or a sermon or even a quote about this guy before. Today, it's time for this obscure Pharisee to receive his due. As I read this story from The Acts of the Apostles it occurred to me that we could learn something from the way Gamaliel conducted himself in a tense situation during the early days of the church. Just a little bit of digging revealed interesting information, showing me that even though his story is passed over quickly in the New Testament, he is much more than a minor priest who observed some interesting times. Welcome to the wisdom of Gamaliel.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters undoubtedly know much more about Gamaliel than we do, as he is a famous rabbi in their history. The Talmud reveals that Gamaliel held a senior position in the highest council of elders known as the Sanhedrin. Even before the day when he saved the lives of Peter and the other apostles by his intervention with the other council members, he was known for his tolerant perspective and measured responses to situations. As a scholar who shaped Jewish thought, he is known for being the first rabbi to argue that women should be protected during any kind of divorce proceedings. That is self-evident to us now, but at the time would have been a game changer.

On the second Sunday of Easter, it is traditional for congregations to look at and reflect upon the post-resurrection interaction between Jesus and Thomas. There is good reason for that. The resurrection was an incredible occurrence. We read in John 20 that Jesus appeared to his disciples on a night when Thomas was not with them. When the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, Thomas replied with the now famous words “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of his nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

We get harsh in our judgements of Thomas for that, but truly who can blame him? It is

human nature for us to need to see something before we believe it, especially something as irrational as Jesus being raised from the dead. We all know how that story plays out...a week later the disciples have gathered together again and this time Thomas is present. Jesus does appear and fulfills Thomas's request, directing Thomas to place his fingers in Jesus' hands, and his hands in Jesus' side. Thomas does so, immediately understands that this bizarre and grace-filled moment REALLY IS HAPPENING, and responds "My Lord and my God!"

Again, a lot is made in Christian circles about what Jesus says to Thomas after Thomas understands: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have come to believe!" I think that was a message that Jesus sent to all of us through the ages, because we don't have the experiences that those first disciples did. Because Jesus is not physically present (and only was for roughly forty days after the resurrection) the vast majority of us *have to believe* without seeing. The interaction with Thomas was a moment in time. It takes faith for us to trust that it happened and that it matters. It matters for how we choose to live in the here and now.

I envy Thomas and the other disciples one thing – the person they saw, the person they touched – was unmistakably Jesus, their friend and teacher. Not only did they touch his wounds, but they must also have recognized the look in his eyes, the way he walked, the sadness or exasperation or humor or joy that occasionally crossed his face. There was a bodily presence to which they could relate. If they had doubts they could dispense with them easily by recalling a shared memory or an inside joke with Jesus, confirming all that history that tied them together.

Where I can get tripped up, in today's world, is discerning what schools of thought and social movements really are of God. Scripture warns us against false gods and idolatrous practices. Without the corporeal presence of Jesus, *how do we know* which way he is leading us, and who he is calling us to be? The first place we turn is to God's Word – we go there for guidance and direction for how to be the people of God and followers of Jesus. There is much good, useful information here, as well as inspiration. But not even the Bible could foresee the amount of religious pluralism present in our world now, or the ethical dilemmas that we would face. With scripture as our foundation and prayer as our engine, we still have to make a lot of decisions, and the solutions are not perfectly spelled out for us. And that is something that Gamaliel can help us with.

Let's review the scene for just a second: Peter and the other apostles are spreading Jesus' teachings and proclaiming the gospel in public places. They have been told not to do that, and have been thrown into prison for doing so. With the help of an angel, the apostles escape the jail, return to the temple, and continue their teaching. They have been re-arrested by the temple police and taken before the council. That's where I began reading this morning. The priests and elders are fired up – they are ready to execute the apostles for their blatant defiance of orders. I shudder to think what could have happened if those murderous impulses had continued unchecked. God still would have found a way to build the body of Christ, but the community had already endured the tragedy of the crucifixion. More bloodshed just would have been that

much more horror, more loss. Maybe Gamaliel realized that, because he spoke up and was able to diffuse some of that anger and save the lives of the apostles.

It's almost as if we can hear Gamaliel saying "Now, wait a minute..." I like that he slows the other council members down. They are right on the edge of surrendering to their own worst impulses, multiplying the sorrow of the community. Gamaliel's calm voice diffuses the tension and makes room for common sense to show up at the table.

And what does Gamaliel say? "Consider carefully what you propose to do to these men." He is a voice for reason and caution in a scenario that threatens to spin out of control. He wants them to remain open to the possibility that God is at work through these people. Instead of using their fear as an excuse to kill the apostles, Gamaliel urges them to wait and see. If these men are fakes, if their teachings and the movement they are part of are not of God, they will fall apart on their own. On the other hand, if what they say and the ways they are reshaping the world really ARE coming from God, the movement cannot help but thrive. The last thing they want to do is tamp down something that is genuinely a manifestation of God's presence and power on earth. Perhaps they have learned something from the hideousness of the cross and the mystery of the resurrection. Gamaliel, at least, does not want to act in haste again. He wants to reserve judgement and certainly not be found "fighting against God."

Gamaliel's intervention saves the apostles' lives. The council still has them beaten, but they were not executed. They continued teaching and proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. I've been thinking a lot about how this whole situation played out. Surely there are instances when we could all hit the "pause" button" and "consider carefully" how we respond to someone else. It troubles me that in our society right now we are so quick to assume the worst about each other – especially anyone different from us or with whom we disagree. In the worst case scenarios, people lose their lives because of this lack of willingness to watch, wait, and develop relationships. On March 15 in New Zealand two mosques were attacked while their members were at prayer. Fifty people lost their lives. Then last week, on Easter Sunday, over 200 Christians died in explosions in Sri Lanka. The Islamic group claiming responsibility for this latest atrocity says it was in retaliation for the New Zealand attacks on Muslims. And yet the first condolence message I received after the news of the attacks broke was from Atiya, one of my friends from Bait-ur-Raimann mosque. Clearly not all Muslims believe that bombs and guns and violence are the answer to our differences, just as not all Christians believe they are an acceptable option. And yet the violence continues. Where does it end? How long are we going to kill each other in God's name?

I sense that Gamaliel, in this charged atmosphere, would say to us to step back, take a breath, and seek another way to live together as children of God. I realize that Gamaliel was coming from the Jewish perspective, and trying to leave open the possibility that this breakaway group was also part of the covenant community. We cannot know what he would say about Muslims or Hindus or Buddhists or any other group. But my best guess is that he would at least leave the possibility open for their tradition to be "of God" at the same time that ours is. Both

groups have extremists who pervert the teachings of their faith, to the detriment and heartache of us all. But again, given his approach to the apostles, even if we cannot know exactly what Gamaliel would say about these current situations, I do not think he is leading us to violence. Following Gamaliel's wisdom, I urge us to "consider carefully" how we treat people we do not understand and I hope that we can trust that the circle of God's love and care is wider than we could ever imagine. If we are to embody the risen Christ in our world we must show his love not only in our words, but in our actions and our relationships. We pray that the Holy Spirit will show us the way.

Thanks be to God. Amen.