

Sermon Series: Summer Reading

Sermon Title: Arrested

Acts 23:1–11

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While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, “Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.” Then the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near him to strike him on the mouth. At this Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” Those standing nearby said, “Do you dare to insult God’s high priest?” And Paul said, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people.’” When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) Then a great clamor arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” When the dissension became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul to pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take him by force, and bring him into the barracks. That night the Lord stood near him and said, “Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.” (Acts 23:1–11, NRSV)

I have a confession to make, Church: when I first read this passage in preparation for the message, I balked at the selection of Scripture: *how in the world am I supposed to preach on this?* What could God possibly have to say to all of us through this story?

I began by reading and understanding the passage as if I was Paul: I would instinctively put myself on the Apostle’s side and see things *only* from his perspective. This isn’t wrong; it’s our default approach with the Bible: we generally side with the hero of any Biblical story. We trust that Paul is in the right because he is led by the Spirit and, therefore, we are suspicious of any who come up against Paul, believing they have nothing to offer us.

But even the bad examples in Scripture are teachable examples. As I continued to wrestle with this passage, my perspective gradually moved away from Paul’s side. Maybe it would do us some good if we left Paul’s side this time and instead put ourselves on the other end, in the seat of the Sanhedrin, so that we could hear God’s voice in a fresh way?

First, a bit about the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a ruling council of 70 Jewish men who were chosen for their impressive knowledge of the Bible and wisdom in making judgments. Located in Jerusalem, they claimed somewhat-limited religious and judicial authority over those who lived in their realm. Most were members of wealthy or prestigious circles. Though they were the best of the best, they were still fallible: as we see in Acts 23, they weren't always able to see God's activity, even when it occurred right in front of them.

Such hesitation and even resistance to Paul, God's messenger, stems from their own loyalties and preconceptions about God. The God that they came to know and expected did not match the God that the Apostle proclaimed in Jesus Christ. Because of their inability to recognize, they rejected Paul's news and instead became embroiled in a debate over the finer points of their faith. This internal conflict becomes the defining feature of the ancient Jewish believers in the Book of Acts; they're so caught up in their own concerns that they miss the great things God is doing. Appalling, isn't it? How could they have missed this? What was so wrong with the Sanhedrin that they missed such a significant moment?

Now, one of the things I have loved about my time with you, Boone UMC, is the bravery you've shown in attempting to live into your vision frame. One of the values this congregation claims is the willingness to ask hard questions. So, let's put this into practice. I'm here to propose a difficult question that G-d may be asking us today:

Do we, the Church, dislike the Sanhedrin in Acts 23 because we see ourselves in them? Are we quick to reject the Sanhedrin because we're more alike than we'd like to admit?

At first glance, this may seem preposterous. But let's see if we can't find some similarities between this ancient group of religious leaders and the Church as we know it. What jumps out immediately to me in Acts 23 is the Sanhedrin's eagerness to denounce and punish Paul, who is bringing something new and unfamiliar into their presence. Rather than sincerely listening to him, they immediately move to physically silence Paul by hitting him across the face! Is this like the 21st century Church? Bruxy Cavey (a Canadian pastor) notes that the tendency in churches today is "to focus their attention on the perimeter, patrolling the boundaries to regulate who is in and who is out."¹ You see, many Christians are more interested in exclusion rather than inclusion, in rejection rather than acceptance, of putting up walls rather than setting the table. How many times has the Church been so concerned with maintaining what it would call "purity" or "orthodoxy" that it silenced and shunned those who may cause a holy commotion?

¹ Bruxy Cavey, *The End of Religion: Encountering the Subversive Spirituality of Jesus* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), p. 212.

The Sanhedrin failed to represent the culture and people around it. The council knew who was “buttering their bread” – their highest priority was appeasing their Roman occupiers and making sure that they were able to keep their seats of power and privilege. Similarly, there are many Christians and Christian groups today who wish to keep the favor of the state, even if that means going against the well-being of the people. I believe that is partially responsible for the animosity that exists between the Church and the culture at large.

Finally, the Sanhedrin is notable in Acts 23 for its internal conflict: Paul is able to tear them apart by simply mentioning a controversial idea, “the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” You may be surprised to hear that the resurrection of the dead was not universally accepted in 1st century Jerusalem. Many Jews rejected it as heresy, causing the faithful to divide into different factions and call each other heretics rather than brothers and sisters. Now, this doesn’t sound the Church, does it? In fact, this Sanhedrin council meeting in Acts may hit *too* closely to home for some of us! Perhaps it brings to mind a particular session from Annual Conference or even a weeknight committee meeting in our own church?

These parallels may shock us. Who would have ever believed that the Church could look so much like the council that put Paul on trial and attempted to end his ministry? What may not surprise you is that, in such a dysfunctional state, the Sanhedrin did not last for very long. Only a few years after Paul stood trial, Rome destroyed the Temple and the city of Jerusalem in an act of retaliation because Jerusalem had revolted. The ancient Rabbis have a different answer: they claim the Temple fell because the Jewish people put their own desires ahead of God’s desires and allowed themselves to be divided. It’s no wonder that, during this revolt against Rome, more Jews were killed by other Jews than were killed by the Romans! Though they were facing an imminent crisis and had work to do, they distracted themselves with internal fighting. They had a hand in their own demise.

Today, as the Church, we find ourselves in a peculiar situation. Churches in most of the western world are facing an increasingly-opaque future. As church attendance dwindles and the culture moves beyond Christianity, it’s hard *not* to feel a bit of worry over the future. Yet, with all of this facing us, Christians are still choosing to busy themselves with questions over correct doctrine and ridiculous arguments like what color the carpets in the Sanctuary should be. We turn away from real opportunities and challenges offered to us, choosing instead to be preoccupied over things that don’t have much of a bearing on reality at all. God may be standing right in front of us, but we can’t see.

Now, I hope you’re *not* hearing me say that the way we do Church is bad. It may be helpful to compare the institutional character of the Church to the bark of a tree: though there isn’t life in the bark itself, the bark protects the life within it. Just like the bark, the church’s structures and traditions can nurture the mysterious and wonderful gift of faith. When we choose to treat the

Institution as the means to God's end, we effectively partner with God to bring the Kingdom to Earth. Because Boone UMC is a firm foundation with dedicated people and faithful organization, things like King Street Church, the ministry at Bradford Park, and community development in Guatemala can happen. When the Institution is the means, then we can fruitfully "love our community and invite all to discover *life* (not death!) in Christ." But when we begin to treat the bark as life itself, we get into trouble. Today's passage warns us of the ugly consequences of trying to preserve the Institution instead of chasing after God's Spirit.

The Good News that we need to be reminded of is that the Church is not in danger of dying. While the Church as we know it may not exist forever, we have to remember that *the Church will always exist*. The Church will live on forever because it's not built on us, or what we do, or what we choose to believe. The Church will live on forever because it's built on the surest foundation: The Rock of Ages, Jesus Christ.

In this age of transition and uncertainty, it's easy for us to be in dismay. It's easy for us to give up, to throw our hands in the air and question whether it's worth it to keep being a part of the Church. But what if we, as a Church, began to treat this age of transition as an opportunity rather than as a death knell? What if we courageously charged into uncertainty, assured that Christ will save the Church, even if that means saving it in spite of ourselves? I truly believe that taking this approach is the better way forward because it frees us *from* fear and frees us *for* creative obedience to the Spirit of God.

How will we respond to the new opportunities God is presenting us in the days to come? Will we respond as we have been responding, like the Sanhedrin, with disunity and bickering? Will we be suspicious of new movements of the Spirit because they threaten the idols we've made out of comfort and stability?

Or will we, like Paul, witness to The Lord faithfully? Will we respond to these wild possibilities with radical obedience and unwavering loyalty to God, not to the Institution? I pray that we may feel God's presence among us and hear God call out to us: "Keep up your courage!" May we all continue to be faithful witnesses, testifying to the transforming power of Christ and not to the brokenness that marked us before we were found in Christ. Amen.