

What Should We Do?  
Acts 2:14a, 36-41  
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I'm sorry, but this kind of biblical story just strains credibility beyond belief, far more than any miracle story, any healing, any exorcism. Without the use of any miracles, by simply telling God's story, and even accusing those listening to him of murder, Peter convinces three thousand people to repent, be baptized, and join the fold. I mean, it's not even a very good sermon. There are no jokes. No pithy one-liners, no breaking down complex words to understand the relevance of their root meanings, no pop culture references, no PowerPoint! I mean, this guy clearly doesn't know anything about preaching, but somehow he manages to connect, and the rest is history.

Obviously, we've only heard the very end of the story, but it begins pretty much like it ends, with Peter straightforwardly relating the story of Jesus, how he fits into the history of the people of Israel and how, in the words which begin tonight's passage, "God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." The occasion for this sermon is the Pentecost experience, when the disciples found themselves speaking all kinds of different languages as the Holy Spirit came upon them. That ecstatic experience led some in Jerusalem that day to accuse the disciples of being drunk at nine o'clock in the morning, but that didn't bother Peter, who simply uses it as an opportunity to begin his sermon by making

reference to the prophet Joel, who prophesied the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on all flesh. And the Holy Spirit was most definitely on Peter as his words led so many people to see the light, and take the plunge.

I suppose it is by virtue of living in a media-saturated world of sound bites, political jargon, and spin that I find this story so hard to believe. With skepticism now one of the highest of human virtues, these days it seems that no one takes what anyone says on faith, no matter whether the subject matter is God, politics, the environment, or baseball statistics, no matter how convincing the proof, no matter how eloquent or passionate the speaker. Actually, that's not entirely true. There are people with followers, but their followers have usually come on board having seen some tangible results. Golfer Tiger Woods, who says very little, and fitness guru Jillian Michaels, who can't seem to shut up, come to mind. One has won a boatload of tournaments and the other has helped people lose a ton of weight. But both of them are attracting people who are already sympathetic, who want to like them and root for them. They are not preaching to hostile or indifferent crowds. But here is Peter, almost trying to antagonize his listeners, at the very least pulling no punches, among people with whom he has no credibility, no good will, no real prospects for success. Remember, these are the same people who, a week earlier, were yelling, "Crucify him!" And yet, Peter's words are so powerful that they cause people to feel they were "cut to the heart," convicted of

their sins, and to ask how they can change the whole direction of their lives. I'll have what he's having.

“Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart.” The Greek word used here is literally translated as “to prick” or “to pierce,” and sometimes translated as “agitated.” And so we might say their consciences were pricked, their illusions pierced, their guts agitated. They knew, hearing Peter's words of truth that their conceptions of Jesus had been false, that their ways of treating one another had been corrupt and abusive, that they had been missing what life had to offer. I am reminded of a not so flattering episode in my own life where my conscience was pricked by the words of a high school classmate. At my high school, you could decorate not only the inside of your locker, but the outside as well. I don't know how a fellow named Charlie Mook decorated his locker, if he did at all, but Charlie knew how I had decorated mine. Up and down my locker, I had placed, to put it nicely, rather rude cartoons cut from rather crude magazines, the kind that teenaged boys like to acquire and hide in their closets, and think no one knows they have. I prided myself at pushing the envelope, taking the right to free speech as far as it would go, and I didn't care what anyone thought about me as a result.

But Charlie Mook was watching, watching from underneath the floppy hat he wore that covered what remained of his hair. Charlie Mook watched while holding on to the cane he used to get around more easily. Charlie Mook watched with the eyes of someone who knew he was dying, but who could see something

more than just that and who could see something I could not see. And so one day as I stood at my locker, perhaps even admiring my collection of crude, Charlie Mook came up beside me and gently and simply said, “Stacey, I would very much appreciate it if you would remove these things from your locker. I’m a Christian and these offend me.” And after I had finished my mini-lecture on the First Amendment, he spoke again, very gently, and said, “I know it may be hard for you to understand, but these cartoons are very demeaning toward women, and they offend me as a religious person. Please take them down.” And when I challenged him, when I dared him to rip them off himself if he found them so offensive, he spoke again, very gently, and said, “I’m not going to rip them down but I would like you to take them down because they offend me.” And with that, he, and his floppy hat and his cane, limped slowly away. Three days later, I was cut to the heart, and my locker was bare. Three months later, Charlie Mook was dead of childhood leukemia. I never did have the chance to thank him for teaching me something in school I should have learned in church, but I’m sure he knows I am grateful for his very straightforward expression of the Gospel.

I was, in those days, corrupt, in the sense in which Peter tells his audience, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” You see, the Greek word for corrupt is *skolios*, or crooked, from which we derive the word for the medical condition of scoliosis, when someone’s spine is crooked and they cannot stand up straight. Charlie may have been the one leaning on a cane, but he was the one who

could stand tall. I was leaning on my own judgment, but was so twisted up I was ready to trip and fall at any moment. The world is full of crooked, corrupt people, bent over or bent sideways by sin and self-delusion. To be sure, Charlie Mook was also crooked, as the Apostle Peter was crooked in his own way and each one of you is crooked in your own ways. There is no escaping scoliosis of the soul, but there a healer who can straighten us up, and desires to do so, if we will stop and listen and allow ourselves to be cut to the heart, and repent, and live our lives according to the promise that is for us, and for our children, and for all whom God calls.

As you have probably discerned over the years, I take seriously Jesus' words about removing the log in one's own eye before attempting to remove the speck from another's, and tend to honor the wisdom of self-reflection over self-righteousness. And yet, it is noteworthy that in Peter's speech, the one in which his Spirit-aided words cut three thousand to the heart, he does not make reference to his own shortcomings. There is no sympathizing with the crowd, no admission that hey, I too didn't get it at first, I denied him three times, I didn't want to believe that he must die. In general, the Gospels paint Peter as just as flawed as the rest of us, but there is no room for that here, only for words designed to reach the hearts of those whose path was leading them astray, away from the life in the Spirit, under whose power Peter was now preaching. There is a time to turn the Gospel's probing questions on ourselves, especially during Lent, but also all year long. But

there is also a time to turn them on others, to testify to and exhort a corrupt generation. Taken together, the stories of Peter call us to do both; to become Peter to examine ourselves for our denials of Christ, but also to become him to speak boldly to those who need still to recognize their denials. The self-reflection of Lent is over, the glory of Easter has come, and like Peter, we are a transformed people with a message of transformation to share.

Peter's message is a harsh one, isn't it? "Know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Listen up, people! You killed him. You left him to suffer in the midday sun with spikes through his wrists and ankles. You let him be mocked and ridiculed with a sign above his head, and soldiers laughing beneath his feet. You made his mother watch her own son writhe in pain and breathe his last. You crucified him. You killed him. The anointed one. The chosen one. The son of man and the son of God, one of us as much as he was not one of us. All of you who stood by and did nothing, who clamored for the Romans to put him on the tree, are guilty, Peter says, and may you be cut to the heart. And they were.

Who would you like to "cut to the heart" with the Easter message? To which crooked, corrupt people would you like to bring these convicting words, and see them ask, in fear and humility, "What should we do?" For me, that would be corporate CEOs and their boards of directors, those who enrich themselves beyond any measure of sanity while laying off those who labor in one country, only to

underpay those who labor in another. Maybe you heard this week that executive salaries have not only risen recently, but have climbed beyond the pre-crash levels. “The typical pay package for the head of a company in the Standard & Poor’s 500 was \$9 million in 2010, according to an analysis by The Associated Press using data provided by Equilar, an executive compensation research firm. That was 24 percent higher than a year earlier, reversing two years of declines.” US CEOs are now making more, on average, than they were before the economic crisis began, despite the increasing rate of unemployment, and the stagnant housing market. No one, not even Jesus himself, is worth nine million dollars a year, much less the 89 million that the most highly paid executive is being paid. To say they are earning their pay is an insult to those who do earn their pay. These guys, and nearly all of them are guys, are an easy target of course, but that does not let them off the hook. They hold the life, health, and death of countless people, and entire communities and even national economies in their hands. No matter what you think of capitalism and competition and the market economy and all that, this kind of disparity of wealth, and the false message of the disparity in the value of human life it sends, is a sin. Would that the Holy Spirit might come upon me and that my words, like Peter’s, would draw forth their repentance, and form the question on their lips, “What should we do?” to which I could answer, “I have some ideas.”

If you’d like a slightly less ambiguous example, try Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, or people who sexually abuse children, or who batter their wives. It doesn’t matter

whom you choose, but in this Easter season, we ought to be choosing someone, someone to whom we bring the unambiguous message of life, someone whose ways of bringing death into the world must be challenged, and whose crooked life must be straightened, so that all God's children may receive the promise which "is for you, for your children, and for all whom God has called." We'll see in next week's story the life to which that corrupt generation was, and our corrupt generation is, called, to the form their repentance took and needs to take, but for this week, I invite you to remember how God has straightened out your life, and to speak that miracle boldly, to find a way to lend your voice to a cause for justice and righteousness. May our life in Christ cut to the heart those who bring murder and death on God's people and God's creation, that they may repent and bring life and love to God's people and God's creation. Amen.