

The Threat of Christianity

Acts 9:1-22

© Stacey Steck

Preached Sunday, April 22, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

Saul the Pharisee would have loved Guantanamo Bay. As a frontline agent in a first century War on Terror, Saul could have used such a place to detain the Christians he tracked down for daring to have an allegiance at odds with his own. Notwithstanding the story of Stephen, one of the earliest martyrs, who was simply stoned to death in the street, we might imagine that post-capture, there was some interrogation taking place, attempts to smoke the terrorists out of their “caves,” or the other such places in which Peter and the other disciples were camped out. Then, after all the information was extracted, the punishment could be meted out, maybe even without the secret and shady trial Jesus received. After all, since he had already been convicted, of course his fellow co-conspirators would be too. Why bother with due process or pesky little things such as truth or evidence. These people had to be eliminated. They were a threat. They were willing to do anything for their God, even die. From Saul’s perspective, they had nothing to lose, not even their lives, and you know that people with nothing to lose are the most dangerous people in the world.

In our post-Easter reading of Acts, we have skipped over a few stories that establish what the early Christian community was like, what they valued, how they conducted themselves. These were a people empowered by the Holy Spirit who

had the power to heal the sick with their touch, as Peter did with a crippled beggar. These were people who had overcome the powerful sentiment of “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is mine,” and, overcoming it, had decided to share their goods in common, that all might eat. These were a people who publicly proclaimed that they owed an allegiance to a higher authority than the emperor or the high priest when they said, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.” These were a people who dared to speak the truth to power and criticize those responsible for the death of Jesus, saying, “The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.” These were a people who did not have a fear of death, that most valuable instrument of torturers everywhere, that understandable human desire to cling to life that has caused many a torture victim to reveal information. Such a people, such an Easter people, had to be eliminated, they were a threat, they were dangerous, for they had nothing to lose, and you know that people with nothing to lose are the most dangerous people in the world.

The world doesn’t know what to do with people as dangerous as that, with World War II Japanese kamakazi pilots willing to make suicide runs that crash their planes into the sides of ships, with the David Koreshes of the world who don’t surrender when surrounded by the FBI, the ATF, and half a dozen other government agencies, with fundamentalist Islamists who strap explosives on their bodies and detonate them in crowded marketplaces. The world doesn’t know what

to do with these people who act like they have nothing to lose, and so the world does what it does best when it cannot comprehend something: it exerts its will and unleashes its violence and tries to put an end to what it feels is threatening it. Sometimes that violence works and the threat goes away, but other times the threat just grows and grows and justifies yet more violence in a neverending spiral of death and destruction.

And so at the beginning of our story in Acts tonight we find Saul acting out the world's fear. That he is doing it on the part of the religious establishment rather than the political order need not concern us. In those days, the leaders of the religious establishment had a lot at stake with their Roman overlords, and keeping the peace, even in this vigilante style, was part of the price of occupation. If Caiaphas the high priest couldn't keep things under control, the Romans would find someone else who could, and so it was in the best interests of those like Saul to quash anything that resembled a threat to their privileged position. Some commentators suggest that Saul may not really have had the authority to bring Christians back to Jerusalem, but given the relationship between Rome and those highly placed Jewish leaders, it seems likely that the empire would have looked the other way to keep the threat minimized. In any case, Saul has been successful in his anti-terror campaign and he's on his way to smoke out of their caves even more of the faithful when he meets his maker on the road to Damascus and suddenly everything changes, the persecutor becomes the persecuted, and the man with

everything to live for now has nothing to lose, and you know that people with nothing to lose are the most dangerous people in the world.

At first glance, it might seem strange to describe Christians as people with nothing to lose, especially when we consider the experience of the early church, and perhaps our own experiences of church, both good and bad. The pictures of the Easter community we glimpse in Acts are wonderful, the kind we'd want to hold on to: we read that "the whole group of those who believed...were of one heart and soul...There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold...Day by day, as they spent much time together in the Temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." That sounds like something worth living for! It sounds like ECF! It sounds like the Providence Presbyterian Church in Chamblee, Georgia that embraced me with such love -- when I finally came back to church after some wandering teenage years -- that I've never left its embrace again. Those of us who have experienced church conflict know just how valuable are those moments and seasons of unity and oneness of Spirit. God has given us the wonderful gift of community and it's worth holding on to.

Yet at the same time, we know that this community is but a foreshadowing of a banquet even grander, the one to which all the saints of every time and place are invited. We know that since Christ is the first-born of the dead, we will follow

as his risen siblings. We know there is a new Jerusalem a-comin, one with a river of life as bright as crystal and streets paved with gold transparent as glass. We know, as Jesus reminded us, “that unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” and that “those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” We know all of these things and we know that we’ve already gained far more than we could ever hope for from a source which will never take it away, never take it away, and so we are able to live life as if we have nothing to lose, and you know that people with nothing to lose are the most dangerous people in the world.

Do you feel dangerous? Do you feel menacing? Are people afraid of you? Does anyone perceive you as a threat to their well being or national security? Does the government have a “file” on you or ECF? They had a file on Martin Luther King, Jr., a man who led a people with nothing to lose. Christian leaders in places like China are watched by their governments because they lead churches full of people with nothing to lose. You see, the mere existence of people who are determined that “we must obey God rather than any human authority” and who act in decidedly countercultural and non-violent ways, even if they do not actively press their case to the government for the values they uphold, the mere existence of such dangerous people is often just cause for persecution and violence. Imagine what awaits those who have the audacity to proclaim aloud and publically the

value of human life over economic interests, the power of God over the power of the state, and the witness of grace and forgiveness over fear and violence.

The early church must have been doing something right. You know you are on the right path when the powers that be get provoked to action against you. From a certain perspective, the early church really was like a religious terrorist group whose behavior confronted the dominant culture in a very challenging way. Mind you, it was the peaceful nature of the movement that caused so much turmoil, and not any violence, but it nevertheless created quite a stir among those with the power to do something about it. You see, the impulse to cling to life no matter the price, that best instrument of the torturer, is the same impulse to seek life that is authentic and compassionate and just, and given the choice, without the fear of violence and exclusion, most people would choose such a life, the life demonstrated by the early Christian community, over that of Empire or that represented by those who sold out the lives of others to save their own, as did Caiaphas and his lot. Empires and fiefdoms don't function well with that kind of competition -- on a level playing field. They don't stand a chance without the odds stacked in their favor by violence and persecution. And so they use the means at their disposal to dispose of the threat.

It so happens in this story that God put an end to one persecutor's anti-terrorism career, but like the mythical beast of the hydra, multiple heads spring forth when you cut off one. There is never a shortage of troops for such a purpose.

Indeed, Saul, who we will come to know as Paul in subsequent chapters, finds that he now has nothing to lose and is therefore a threat worth eliminating. God even promises him a life of persecution when Jesus tells Ananais, “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” Be that as it may, there is still far more power in the hearts of those with nothing to lose than in all the weapons of Empire, and the fact that we read today of Paul’s new identity and not Caesar’s iron rule tells us much about that power. As evidenced by Paul’s own life, God has not left us defenseless even if our shields don’t ward off physical blows. God has not left us unprepared for the battle, even if our weapons are but love and grace. Indeed, Christians are the most dangerous people on the planet, if we practice what we preach.

You may be flashing back to the beginning of this sermon when I listed such groups as kamakazi pilots, the Branch Davidians, and Islamic Jihad as dangerous people with nothing to lose, and then went on to identify ourselves as being in the same lot. What should cause you concern is not that the church may actually be like those groups, who return violence with violence, or that Empire doesn’t really care if there is a difference between types of dangerous people and punishes both equally. What should concern you is if there is no one after you, if you are not on anybody’s terrorism watch list. Is your lifestyle as a Christian a threat to anyone? Does it make people question their choice for the values of Empire or do we make it easy for them by living those values in our own lives? Remember what

distinguished the apostles and their followers. Remember what made them dangerous in the eyes of Saul and Caesar. Remember that it was that they loved one another in such an authentic and sincere and genuine way that people could see a real alternative for their communities and were choosing it.

On the road to Damascus, Paul learned that he had nothing to lose, that on account of the same Jesus Christ he was persecuting, he had gained the life Christ died to give him, a life about which he could later say, in his letter to the Philippians, “Whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.” Indeed, for as many people as he had killed and imprisoned, Paul was far more powerful and dangerous a man as a Christian than as a Pharisee. He was the best kind of dangerous, a peaceful and loving witness that threatened and menaced anything which would stand in the way of hope in Christ and the year of the Lord’s favor for all people. May God help us to be so dangerous and to live as if we have nothing to lose. Amen.