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The Surprising Acts of God III: Educating Peter

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During the season of Eastertide, Louise, Ed and I are preaching a series, The Surprising Acts of God, based upon the stories from “The Acts of the Apostles”. As I’ve mentioned before, Acts is the second volume of a two-part account of the Holy Spirit, written by the same author as The Gospel of Luke.

Throughout Luke and Acts, the Holy Spirit is synonymous with surprising and disrupting, as well as life-giving. After Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, his followers bravely venture back into their lives and communities empowered by their belief and the surprising and disrupting Holy Spirit.

Picking up where Louise left off, the elites judging Peter and John asked, “by what power or name” were they able to heal.

Peter’s simple reply, “Jesus,” and reminding them of Jesus’ self-description as the “cornerstone” brought the room to silence. You can cut the tension.

Dear God, from whom all blessings flow of life, grace, and the power to live, silence us to hear these powerful words that your spirit might stir in us and we experience the same courage as Peter and John to speak your truth today. Amen.

Listen to what transpires next...

4:13-22

¹³ Now when (the elites) saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions

of Jesus. ¹⁴When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition.

¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another.

¹⁶They said, "What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them; we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name."

¹⁸So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

¹⁹But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; ²⁰for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

²¹After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. ²²For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than forty years old.

Let's take a step back from all that verbal jousting to recall the origin of this conflict.

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Early, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus launches his ministry with the words from Isaiah, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me....to bring good news to the poor, let the oppressed go free,” concluding with “these words are fulfilled in your hearing.”

Immediately, Jesus runs afoul of the authorities. Who is he to claim such spiritual power?

While preaching near the Sea of Galilee to an ever-expanding crowd, Jesus sees two boats in the water. Once ashore, he gets in Simon Peter’s boat, asks to be pushed back out to the water, sits down, and teaches from a seated position, as one with authority, and allows the crowd full view.

After Jesus finishes, he tells Simon Peter to put out his nets.

Skeptically Peter replies, “We’ve fished all night with nothing.”

Imagine a landlocked carpenter telling a season fisherman what to do. But, he does as he was told, and hauls in so many fish, the boat began to sink from the weight. At that moment, Peter’s entire being recognizes Jesus’ holy power and cries, “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man.”

Jesus calls him and the other fishermen follow and learn to fish for people. That’s how the writer of Luke, introduces us to Peter and his journey.

When faced with a crowd of thousands and a few scrapes of fish and bread, Jesus puts him to work when he tells his disciples “you feed them.”

Peter witnesses atop a mountain Moses and Elijah's presence when Jesus turned dazzling white with God's blessing "this is my son."

When Jesus asks all the disciples, "who do you say that I am?" Peter is either the only one who musters the courage or perceptive to break the silence with "you are the messiah." At that moment, Peter enters dangerous territory, placing Jesus above Ceasar.

In return, Jesus offered him the only beatitude for a single individual, "blessed are you, Simon Peter."¹

While in a storm-tossed sea, Peter steps from the boat to follow Jesus, at first captivated with faith, then sinking with doubt, only to be rescued by Jesus' strong arm.

Peter learns his lessons by his repeated attempts to profess loyalty to Jesus only to succumb to fear or doubt or ignorance, growing stronger each time he begins again in faith through grace.

Education by trial and error.

His final lesson, painfully remembered and repeated for us all, comes on the night of the Last Supper when sits by a warm fire, denies Jesus three times, as Jesus, alone, faces his judges.

As told in the Gospel of John, three days later, Peter accepts the risen Christ's forgiveness and the broken bread of communion.

¹ Fredrick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, (New York: Harper Row, 1979), 134.

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Three times asked, “do you love me” and three times the stirring within of Peter, “yes Lord.”

Peter keeps his promised “yes” as he heals and preaches and continues to do Jesus’ dangerous and holy work.

From a lifetime of manual labor, we can imagine his hands gnarled from hauling heavy fishing nets, calloused from the abrasions of the rope. The skin on his neck leathered from sun damage. He will likely always smell of fish.

His eyes are fringed in heavy wrinkles from scanning sunlight waters. Now his eyes are ablaze with an ability to see Jesus in the face of the other.

He has seen it all. He learned at the hands of the master and teaches others by word and deed. He fears nothing as he walks towards the same fate as Jesus.

The elites judge Peter to be uneducated, ignoring his divine education, and ordinary, despite his dangerous ability to heal. He must be judged.

In contrast, these elites achieved their status from having done all the right things of proper schooling, benefited from social advantage, earning their authority to maintain order. They judge others.

As we listen in on their conversation, they confide nothing prepared them to see a man cured in the name of Jesus. Only weeks before they also judged him to be subversive and dangerous.

The evidence of a man healed, obvious to everyone, including all the common, uneducated people who now flocked to follow these apostles – 5,000 more just from this healing – demands their prudent decision. To stymie the truth, they insist this uneducated man be silent.

Here is an important footnote. Throughout history this text and others have been twisted and taken out of context to be used as a weapon to justify anti-Semitic ideas and discredit other faiths.

To be clear, Jesus and Peter and John were thoroughly Jewish as are these elites. This conflict rises within their collective community.

It serves as a warning to any of us who seek to claim superiority over another within the Christian faith. Denominations and even with congregations fight with the conviction they alone not just cornered but rather invented the truth.

We grieve the ill caused to those who were excluded or condemned for their beliefs and very being.

Judging and being judged appears throughout our scriptures. Moses and Pharaoh. Nathan and David. Any of the prophets. Jesus.²

These stories remind us of God's preference for those who are maligned and oppressed. The stories remind

² Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina series, Ed. Daniel J. Harrington, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 80.

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us of the dangers of judging in ways to the protect powerful.

The plotline pervades secular stories.

One of the movies nominated in several categories for an Academy Award tonight is *The Trial of the Chicago 7*.

Written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, with his incomparable sharp dialogue and swift pace, it traces the trial of eight political activists accused of conspiring to incite riots during the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Each defendant traveled to Chicago that summer for differing reasons and often conflicting methods to oppose to the Vietnam War. Each of them only wanted to be heard.

This trial inspired art, music, and theatre to interpret and retell the events. I don't think I need a spoiler alert since the trial historically received such exposure yet will be a bit circumspect.

In this movie, one of the prosecuting attorneys for the US, Richard Schultz, is portrayed as young, educated, and upwardly mobile. Before accepting the case, he claims it is not winnable but proceeds since the high profile and will propel his career forward.

Throughout the trial, Judge Julius Hoffman shows prejudice for the prosecution, finding all eight of the defendants and their attorneys in contempt of court at various times. He struggles to maintain control, often making a mockery of his own court.

When one of the defendants, the only Black man, Bobbie Seale, speaks continually for his constitutional rights, Judge Julius has him removed and disciplined, meaning beaten. He returns to the court, gagged and chained to a chair.

To this horror, you see a visceral reaction by the prosecuting attorney, Shultz, at this inhumane treatment. Out of impulse he objects on behalf of his opponent. Seale's case is dismissed so only seven defendants remain.

At the end, the character portraying Tom Hayden is allowed to speak on behalf of all the defendants. Despite being advised to keep his remarks brief, he begins to read the 4,752 names of soldiers killed since the war began.

In respect of this act, revering human life, Schultz, rises to listen to Hayden as honors the fallen soldiers. All the courtroom rises in solidarity.

At the time Peter and John stood trial, we can only wonder if any of those elites, the educated and observant men, also experienced the divine power Peter and John share so freely.

Would they be willing to accept the grace to begin again in faith and solidarity with them and God?

Would they accept the indisputable evidence of the man standing, healed by a power they don't possess?

Would any one of them see that as judges they were attempting to judge God?

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Quoting theologian and Africana scholar Willie James Jennings:

This is the great dilemma of the advantaged in this world. They institutionalize life. They are socially ordered and enact social order. They are inside what they create...and often cannot see a divine judgment being brought on them, brought against them. God judges them from the position of judged.

God waits in silence with those brought in courts, standing in front of tribunals, juries, and officers of the law and listening as the judges of this world, not only in courtrooms but also in boardrooms and legislative halls, decide on their future...Peter in this moment offers a truth they desperately need to hear: Jesus is the cornerstone of any building effort that would move toward life...No one else can do this.³

Peter grew from an uneducated fisherman to become the rock upon which Jesus' church flourished, not by his own power, but from humility to allow God to work through him to the benefit of others.

Peter's legacy continues to teach us when we open our hearts to this and the other stories of his brave witness that even we can speak the truth and change the world.

³ Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, *Belief A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 47.



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