SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Hardheaded”* Acts 5:27-32

Easter morning has come and gone, and after all of the stories we have about the disciples falling asleep while they were in the garden that last night with Jesus, or denying that they were one of his followers, or locking themselves in a room out of fear, this morning’s lesson must come as a welcome surprise after all that. Not only are they “out and about,” they are boldly going about preaching and teaching Jesus’ way.

In fact, as we just heard, they are even being arrested. What we did not hear is the episode before this. In that part of the story, the apostles are healing and preaching, and they are tremendously successful. People are coming out in droves to see them, to hear the message, and to be healed. So many people were coming out to them that the temple officials, the Sadducees, have them arrested and put in jail.

However, they did not stay there too long before an “angel of the Lord” came and freed them, and then instructed them to “go stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message of [Jesus’] life.” [v.20]

As we just heard, their arrest did *not* dampen their enthusiasm for their ministry. Indeed, at the end of this story (which we did not hear), when told they were going to be flogged [Peter and the disciples] *rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. 42And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.* [v.41-42]

This is not the last time the disciples would be arrested and put in jail. There were going to be many more arrests. The episode we heard this morning was a foretaste of what was to come. They would all spend time in both Jewish and Roman jails, but they would not be stopped.

The casual observer would, no doubt, come to the conclusion that Peter and the disciples were quite “hardheaded.” No matter what kind of opposition or persecution they faced, they would not stop. Not until they were executed.

“Hardheaded.” This is usually the description given to someone who persists despite overwhelming opposition. It is usually *not* a compliment…unless your hardheadedness is your response to hypocrisy, dishonesty, and injustice.

I was reminded of an episode in our nation’s recent history, and the slogan “nevertheless, she persisted.” Quoting from the *Wikipedia* entry on it:

*“Nevertheless, she persisted” is an expression adopted by the* [*feminist*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism) *movement, especially* [*in the United States*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism_in_the_United_States#Fourth-wave_feminism)*. It became popular in 2017 after the* [*United States Senate*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Senate) *voted to require Senator* [*Elizabeth Warren*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Warren) *to stop speaking during the* [*confirmation*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_congressional_hearing) *of Senator* [*Jeff Sessions*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeff_Sessions) *as* [*U.S. Attorney General*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Attorney_General)*. Senate Majority Leader* [*Mitch McConnell*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mitch_McConnell) *made this remark during his comments following the vote.*

*The expression* [*went viral*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_phenomenon) *as feminists posted it on social media with* [*hashtag*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hashtag) *references to other women. Its meaning has expanded to refer more broadly to women's persistence in* ***breaking barriers, despite being silenced or ignored.***

There is no doubt that the disciples were breaking barriers, no doubt that they would not be silenced. Thank goodness, neither were they ignored.

The disciples had found in the ministry and teaching of Jesus a newfound respect and desire for the freedom and justice he taught. They responded to the love of God he showed them. That was really the most important point: Jesus taught and showed the disciples that he did not act on his own authority. His words and his deeds were guided by the goodness and truth that had always been a part of their faith-life, that had always been God’s activity and endeavors toward mankind. In fact, we could say that God as the epitome of hardheadedness as ours is a God who has never given up on us but continues to extend a hand of support and love in our direction.

As Peter and the disciples show us in this passage, they have learned their lesson well and have become hardheaded about their ministry and mission of bringing the truth about God to as many people as possible. And, of course, their fate confirms what we already know about the truth: that very often, we are required to be hardheaded about the truth we know, and the compassion and justice we want to see prevail in the world because all of these good things are *expensive*—someone is always going to have to “pay a price” for the freedom and justice we enjoy.

Sometimes it will be the people, like the disciples, who refused to stop what they believed God was calling upon them to do and to be. Their love of God, and of God’s love of justice, was important enough to them to persist in their mission. It will lead each of them to an ultimately dangerous confrontation with the power of the empire. It will lead to their executions.

It is also true that justice also causes those who have an unfair advantage to also lose some of their power and privilege they have enjoyed.

Indeed, when we look at the Sadducees’ concerns in this morning’s passage, what we find is that their concerns are no longer theological. They are personal and political. They fear the people will follow the disciples. If they could not continue to control the people, they could also lose their authority and position granted them by the Romans.

In the passage we heard this morning, the savvy leaders of the Council saw clearly how popular these men and their message had become among the crowds of people they had addressed. They rightly feared a popular backlash if they dealt too harshly with the disciples. In deference to the simmering crowd, the escaped prisoners are gingerly escorted back to yet another full meeting of the Sanhedrin.

It seems that freedom and justice are decidedly *not* free. Our good news, though, is always going to be found in the people who are able to put aside personal concerns and persist in their desire to see righteousness prevail.

In last week’s sermon, I remembered two Protestant ministers as two who would not turn aside from their desire to bring God’s justice into the world. This week, I have introduced our children to Greta Thunberg, and if we had had the time, I would have liked to remind them of a young poet, Amanda Gorman.

Both bring the urgency and energy of youth to their desire for earth and social justice. Their voices are fresh. The way in which they express their desire for a better world is unburdened by the many failures the more mature among us have experienced. Their hope is still new, wholesome, and bold. This should make them both precious to us. The voices and the desires of youth should always capture our attention, should always make us thoughtful and reflective.

And we should guide and support them if any of them show any signs of becoming hardheaded for goodness, truth, or justice—when they show any signs of wanting to follow in God’s ways.

I hope we will all find the stories of the apostles’ hardheadedness a sign of hope and a worthy example to follow because their hardheadedness was learned at the feet of the master of hardheadedness, Jesus Christ, who did not turn aside from his commitment and his mission, but continued on, even to the cross and ultimately, to his resurrection.

I would like to bring this sermon to a close with a portion of the poem Amanda Gorman wrote and recited this past January. These are her words from *The Hill We Climb*:

*We did not feel prepared to be the heirs of such a terrifying hour.*

*But within it we found the power to author a new chapter, to offer hope and laughter to ourselves.*

*So, while once we asked, how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe, now we assert, how could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?*

*We will not march back to what was, but move to what shall be: a country that is bruised but whole, benevolent but bold, fierce and free.*

*We will not be turned around or interrupted by intimidation because we know our inaction and inertia will be the inheritance of the next generation, become the future.*

*Our blunders become their burdens.*

*But one thing is certain.*

*If we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children’s birthright.*

*So let us leave behind a country better than the one we were left.*

*Every breath from my bronze-pounded chest, we will raise this wounded world into a wondrous one.*

*We will rise from the golden hills of the West.*

*We will rise from the windswept Northeast where our forefathers first realized revolution.*

*We will rise from the lake-rimmed cities of the Midwestern states.*

*We will rise from the sun-baked South.*

*We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover.*

*And every known nook of our nation and every corner called our country, our people diverse and beautiful, will emerge battered and beautiful.*

*When day comes, we step out of the shade of flame and unafraid.*

*The new dawn balloons as we free it.*

*For there is always light, if only we’re brave enough to see it.*

*If only we’re brave enough to be it.*

Goodness, hardheaded words, if ever I have heard them. Words that I believe would have pleased the disciples. Words that I hope are also engraved on our hearts and spirits as we continue to give thanks for the Resurrected One, and all that he continues to give us. Amen.