

Laying It On The Line

May 19, 2013

Acts 2:1-21

The sequence of events which had preceded it had captured the attention of an entire nation. And now, the scene which was unfolding was one of incredible drama. It was one that most of us remember to this day, one that few of us will ever forget.

Hundreds of media types were gathered in California to cover a murder trial. After months of theatrics by both prosecution and defense, detailed wrangling, and rulings by the judge -- months spent under the scrutinizing eye of the public who hung on every word as it was covered live by CNN and headlined most major newscasts.

Finally a jury was sent into seclusion and faced with the task of deciding the fate of a single man.... O.J.Simpson.

When they filed back into the courtroom, the judge looked at the jury foreman and asked, "*Have you reached a decision?*" Everyone held their breath. Reporters had their cell phones ready. The world watched. What would be said? What's going to be the outcome?

Incredible drama. Everything would hang on the words of this one person. And the moment the decision was announced, the phone lines and satellite links began to hum as news travelled literally around the globe. Get the word out! People are waiting to know.

Within moments the talk began around office water coolers, in the donut shops, in shopping mall checkouts, and over back fences. "*Have you heard?*"

Can you imagine the drama as people waited for the word to come. Probably some of you were caught up in all that.

That same sort of thing happened almost 2000 years ago as a huge crowd gathered around a non-descript building in some low-rent suburb of Jerusalem. There's been a strange event -- rushing wind, a bunch of blue-collar types speaking in a variety of different languages.

They're saying amazing things about Almighty God -- fluently, leaving many visitors who had travelled from various corners of the globe to Jerusalem for a high holy day totally amazed.

They're standing around scratching their head. They can't figure it out. But they're unwilling to simply shrug it off and walk away to continue their tour of town. They mill around. They ask each other if someone knows what's up.

A few try to laugh it away. "Ah - they're all plastered. Totally blitzed. It's just a fluke! Forget it!"

But others wave them off. "No, no. This is no fluke. There's something going on. What is it?"

And suddenly one man stops his spontaneous praise and steps forward. It's Peter.

The same man who not too long ago denied that he even knew Jesus of Nazareth now clears his throat and begins to speak boldly about him.

"This is no fluke," he tells the crowd. "What you're seeing has to do with Jesus of Nazareth, the one that you put to death a month ago. You shouted with the rest of the crowds that you wanted him crucified. You gathered round that hill outside of town and watched him convulse in pain. You saw him hang limp and dead.

But we've seen something else. We've seen him since. We've seen him alive! He is risen. And he is Lord! He is God's specially anointed one. He is the Christ, the one that the entire Scripture and all the prophets spoke about. He's the one your forefathers prayed would come. And YOU let him be put to death!"

The crowd is deadly silent. A few shift around. They shuffle their feet, they stare at the ground. They are terribly uncomfortable. They're afraid. And then one cries out, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Can there be any higher drama? Here is this huge crowd gathered. They realize what they've just done. Now they're standing there, begging: "Peter, tell us! What must we do to be saved?!"

The tension is so thick you could cut it with a sword. Everyone is waiting for the word - the message of being right with God, the difference between eternal life and death. Thousands of people are begging for an answer.

And there stands Peter. He's been with Jesus. He's seen the miracles. He's heard the words. He heard Jesus say, "I have come that you might have life in all its fullness." He's already told the crowd that what is happening is no fluke. Every eye is turned to him. He is called to answer.

What will he say? Will he soft peddle the moment? Will he tell them not to feel too guilty -- after all everyone can make a mistake, especially with a crowd moving them along and getting caught up in a mob mentality?

It's up to him. It's sort of like being at bat in the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, 2 out. Will he strike out or come through with the big hit? Will he lay it on the line or not?

And does he ever come through!....."Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." The message is out. Repent. Turn.

It's clear and it's simple. But the fact is that Peter was just getting warmed up. He got on some kind of a roll. Luke, the writer of Acts, tells us that Peter preached one doozy of a long-winded sermon.

He pushed. He prodded. He challenged. And Luke records that 3000 people responded, moving from death to life, new children in the Kingdom of God! 120 to 3000 in one afternoon! We talk about growing the church. How's that for church growth!?

Peter gets the message out. And the Holy Spirit took that simple message and filled it with dynamite-like power to change the hearts of those who heard it.

The message Peter preached is the same one that has been preached down through the ages. Many over the centuries have been ridiculed for laying this message on the line -- Turn from sin. Believe in Jesus.

People have been beaten, tortured and murdered for it, the message of Jesus. And it's the message that is in our possession today, a message that God is calling us to get out into our neighborhood, our city, wherever we happen to be

God is not interested in us getting caught up in some message of being the church of the blue hymnal - or the red. He doesn't want us to get out the word that we're the people who stand when we sing, or sit, or clap; Who use Thee's or You's, bongo drums or the diapason stop on the organ; that we do this or have that.

What God wants us to be proclaiming, with our lives more than with our words, is the powerful, unashamed message that Peter spoke.- that Jesus Christ offers life in all its fullness..

I think we must seriously consider the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 10:32-33: "Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth I will deny before my Father in heaven."

And most of us would say, "Oh I would never deny Jesus." Well, no, we probably wouldn't use words that say I deny or disown or disclaim Jesus. But what are we saying with our lives, our attitudes?

Because the honest truth is, folks, that if we claim the name of Christ, then however we are living our lives, we are saying to the world, "this is how Jesus is." And I'm not talking about going around with a pained, pious look and a long face and being serious all the time.

In fact, I have to say that some of the most deeply spiritual people I have ever known were also some of the biggest cut-ups. They knew how to have fun, and took Jesus seriously when he said life in all its fullness.

But think about this. Imagine that someone came up to you and asked you, "What must I do to be right with God?"

Of course, you know that people don't tend to do this too much today, right? For one thing, quite frankly, many people I run into tend to think they're on the up and up with God; that things are going pretty good. I mean, hey, I don't sin - no murder, embezzlement or cheating on my wife. I go to church. I even pray some. I try to be good. I believe there's a God. Know what I mean? They're not walking around with an impending sense of doom.

But if someone did ask a question like that, do you know what you'd likely hear? Things like, "You seem to be happy. Why?..... How do you manage to cope through all that junk you've faced?..... There's something different about you. What is it?....."

They have seen something in your life, something about you that they wish they had. They want to know more And there's the window for you to lay it on the line, just like Peter did. And it doesn't have to be that dramatic. You don't have to be a long-winded speaker. In fact, I would encourage you not to be.

You don't have to call for the attention of the entire office and speak to a crowd. It may be in the simple, yet powerfully effective words of your own personal experience. -- just a simple, genuine slice of your own life.

It doesn't need to be a full-blown story. Just a window into your inner existence. You respect their space. Leave the door open. Give them a standing invitation to ask for more. And let God begin to root around in their heart and mind.

Let me just share with you one way that I might answer that question. "Bob, Mary, one day I discovered the difference between being religious and being a Christian. If you're interested, I'd be happy to tell you about it."

You know the difference -- between being religious and being a Christian? Religion is where you try to **DO** spiritual stuff. You try to make up for past failures. You try to earn God's love. You try to work your way into God's good books.

But the trouble with religion is that you never know when you've done enough, because the fact is you never can do enough. Religion has no quota. And it leaves you to go nuts. Or live in fear or uncertainty. Or throw everything spiritual away, as an unsatisfying waste of time.

But our loving God doesn't leave us on the dead-end road of religion. Our God hates sin and cannot, will not, permit it in his presence. But in spite of his hatred of sin, God loves the sinner - you and me - so much that he allowed the death of one man to be the atonement for the sin of all people.

When Jesus cried out on the cross, "It is finished," he had done for us what we can never do for ourselves. And all we have to do is believe that and accept it on faith That's Christianity.

So often I run into people who play pluses and minuses with life. They write down a minus in their mind for every foul-up. Got wasted Saturday night, minus. But -- went to church Sunday morning and threw an extra \$50 in the plate. Plus. And we try to balance out the plusses with the minuses. Trouble is, the Word of God teaches that pluses *CAN'T* wipe out the minuses..

Like in our society. You can't commit a crime, appear before the judge and claim that helping some old lady across the street on your way to court should be good enough to forget the whole business. The penalty must be paid.

The only way to get rid of the minuses in our life is to believe that God offers our justification in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. When we do that, we have the assurance of God's grace.

Those of you who have come to any of the Bible classes I teach here have heard me talk about grace as that bridge which spans the enormous gulf between the total righteousness that God requires and our complete inability as human beings to come anywhere near that righteousness.

It's like living on one side of the Grand Canyon. And God is on the other side. The gap between is caused by sin. We can try to jump that canyon. We could be the best olympic triple-jumper or someone who can barely walk with the aid of a crutch. But our result would be the same. Falling to a horrible death.

We need a huge bridge to get to the other side. That bridge is the grace of God offered in the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

That's the message! And if we just communicate God with our lives, giving people space to think and consider, God through His Spirit will do the sales job.

The message of Peter 2000 years ago is the same message we have today. Oh, we may package it differently today as we try to communicate to people in our multi-media driven time; what Billy Graham has dubbed "the age of the artist". We may use modern music, fax, email, video, computer images, texting and the like.

But distill it down and the message is the same. In fact, get beyond all that fancy stuff, and the method is still the same. It is person to person living the word.

There is a quote attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, although scholars debate whether St. Francis himself actually originated it. But whoever did, it is still a great one to follow: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary."

I would emphasize the "if necessary" part. More often than not, it is not our words, but our lives that will show the world that Jesus Christ is real to us. By the way, St. Francis did for sure say, "let all the brothers preach by their deeds."

And that is our task as God's ,people, as God's representatives, as God's witnesses in the world, to go out there and live our faith, and live it in such a way that others want to know the secret of our life.

That, friends, is laying it on the line. May God help us all to do just that.