



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



**A Dose of Wisdom
Text: Acts 5:27-42
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As a minister, one thing I have heard many times over the years is that many people are disgusted by or turned off by organized religion. Many will argue that nothing much that is good comes out of organized religion. They often point out to the numerous stories we find in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles about the people who were part of organized religion making war on Jesus and the apostles.

Luke, however, reminds us that this is not true in all instances. There are good people who are a part of the structure and organization we live in.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus is buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Council who was quite interested in Jesus and what Jesus had to say.

And here, in Acts of the Apostles, we encounter a rabbi named Gamaliel.

Peter and the apostles have been brought back to the Council which governed the Jewish people.

They had been arrested, freed from prison by an angel, and went back to preaching. And they refused to stop.

The talk was simple. Let's kill them. It was the only way that they could silence the apostles and kill this movement.

But a Rabbi named Gamaliel stands up to speak.

Luke tells us that Gamaliel was respected by the people. He was, historically, one of the leading and best teachers of Rabbis. Gamaliel was beloved and respected by all. He was also the grandson of the Rabbi Hillel who was one of the most highly respected leaders that ancient Judaism ever had.

And Gamaliel gives the gathering a dose of wisdom. He reminds them that others had come along, claiming to be someone important and they had all been killed and the movements died.

Jesus had been killed but the movement was growing and Gamaliel was basically saying that they needed to use some discernment to determine if this was of human origin or from God. If it was of human origin it would fail; if it was of God it would not only not fail, but they'd all be guilty of fighting against God.

They end up flogging the apostles and letting them go. Gamaliel's wisdom spares the life of the apostles and the Christian church survives.

What Gamaliel does is forces the people on the Jewish Council to discern what they are doing.

There is an underlying issue which Gamaliel does not say bluntly, but implies:

We may be wrong.

His concern that this may be of God is a statement that he is concerned that they might be wrong about their view of God, their view of Jesus, and their theological perspective. The only way to find if they were, in fact, believing in that which was true was to do some honest discerning. And honest discernment on issues of faith, requires three things. Discernment takes time, study, and prayer.

There's an old cliché, haste makes waste. Haste sometimes really is waste.

In the history of Christianity, there have been movements and trends that have taken place over the centuries. Some are in history books telling of something that some group did at some time. Some are part of our heritage and the ongoing heritage of Christianity.

To discern the way and will of God takes time. If you read the Bible and read the way God lives and moves among the people you'll notice something over and over again. Many of the stories, many of the issues, many of the problems that are solved, take an incredible amount of time.

One thing I have noticed in my life about people who have been the most spiritual people I know. I'm not referring to the people who speak the most, but the people who live in a gentle harmony with God. They live and breathe a sense of spirituality which is amazing. And they all have one thing in common. None of them are very young and all of them have been about listening to God as a significant part of their lives.

I have always had a deep fascination and respect for the Amish. I've taken a lot of people, over the years, to Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and shared my fascination and respect for the Amish with so many people. Lest you worry, I'm not becoming Amish....I like modern life way too much. But I profoundly respect them.

Their behavior following the brutal murders and deaths of young girls has stunned the nation. Their generosity towards the widow whose husband murdered their children and their profound sense of forgiveness has baffled so many. Unless you really knew about these people. If you really knew about the Amish, their response is not a huge surprise. They are not flashy, they are not preachy, they don't impose their values on the world, but they truly live what they believe.

It is a faith and a love of God that has literally marinated them to their bones. It is a faith and love of God, and an understanding of God that is old. It is a faith, a love, and a tradition that has been passed on from generation to generation.

The other people I've met who are like this have been monks. If you've ever hung around a monastery and met monks, old monks, you'd understand it. They have a sense of peace, a sense of tranquility that has come from years of prayer and living out faith.

Gamaliel has this as well. And he knew that true discernment, true wisdom, requires time to reach into the core of our being.

Discernment also requires study.

Culturally, we often view a lack of education, or even ignorance, as a great quality to have. In theology, when a person becomes learned, we often fear them because they might confront us with a new perspective, one that we find frightening. So we prefer to live, spiritually, with a lack of knowledge.

Think about this, however. It is said that most people, most Christians, end their theological education in the 8th grade and/or nothing else they study is beyond an 8th grade level.

If you went to a dentist and asked your dentist about his training and he said that he read a book about teeth in the 8th grade and it was enough for him, would you open your mouth?

If you went to an accountant and asked about his education and he said, "My last class in ciphering was in the 8th grade!" would you let him do your taxes?

If you went to a surgeon and she told you that she last cracked a science book in the

8th grade, but was really good at the game *Operation*, would you let her operate on you?

Yet, theologically, we often embrace and hold on to dear life those things we last looked at in the 8th grade.

We sometimes don't look and see a quality that people who have changed Christianity had in common besides being holy. They were usually brilliant, well educated individuals.

St. Paul had trained to be a Rabbi, and had a brilliant grasp of Judaism, the teachings of Jesus, the Greek philosophy.

In the 13th Century one of the most amazing reformed in the history of Christianity was a man named Thomas Aquinas, mostly regarded as a Roman Catholic saint, but very much a pre-Reformation reformer. Aquinas' mind, theologically, has often been likened to Einstein and Sir Isaac. Newton. He was a genius. The more you learn about him the more and more you realize how amazing he was.

Within Protestantism we see Martin Luther as the starting point of the Protestant Reformation and sometimes he is simply referred to us a humble, troubled priest.

This is a man who translated the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into German. He was brilliant and learned.

We often seem to, in our culture, for some odd reason, honor ignorance and a lack of education. It seems that for many people, a lack of knowledge makes one holier and better than being learned.

Christianity spread and grew and has prospered for many, many reasons. But one of the many reasons is that there have been brilliant, learned people who have articulated the Gospel from generation to generation. Jesus was brilliant and wise and to invites us into lives filled with discernment. We all can't be brilliant, but we can all learn so much more. And in our learning we truly become better at discernment.

But study and time are not enough. We also need prayer. The gospels tell us over and over again that Jesus went off to a quiet place to pray.

All the holy, wise people I referred to, were also people of prayer.

It takes time to truly get to know God's way and will.

It takes a great deal of study to learn about God.

But if we do not pray, all the time in the world and all the study in the world will not enable us to know God. And we cannot discern God's will unless we know God.

Think about this. We have people who love us in this world. We have people who do, on some level understand us. This knowledge, this love, this understanding comes from time and conversation and sharing. If we never speak, if we never share, if we never take the time, we never get to know others and be known by others.

The same is true of God. If we never speak, if we never listen, if we never take the time to be in the presence of God in prayer, we fail to get to know God.

The great Rabbi Gamaliel, to this day, is revered in Judaism for being one of the wisest and best Rabbis in history. The great Rabbi Gamaliel is honored in Christianity because he intervened and protected the lives of the apostles by inviting a time of discernment, take time, study, and prayer to get to know and understand how God was moving in the world.

He stands as an inspiration of goodness and wisdom to each of us.