

## I

At a wedding service, I get the very best seat in the house. I get to stand right here at the end of the aisle and watch the whole wedding party process into the sanctuary.

But I've noticed something odd about my power and authority in weddings. In the lead up to start of the wedding service, I have a tremendous amount of power. No disrespect to the musicians or wedding coordinators or to the family and friends, but let's be honest, at a wedding, there are three people required for the wedding service to actually take place, and the officiant is one of them.

But something very strange happens as soon as I pronounce the marriage and send the happy couple back down the aisle. All of my power evaporates in an instant. The family and friends are all celebrating and congratulating the couple and trying to line up for more photos, the wedding guests are making their way to the reception, and if anyone notices me at all, I get a look that says, "Oh, you're is still here?"

I'm not complaining, mind you. I really do love weddings. It's just amazing though how in the span of about 30 minutes I can go from being one of the three most important people in the building to being a bystander.

## II

Who has authority, and why? How is power exercised, and on behalf of

whom? Whether we're aware of it or not, these kinds of questions are emerging more and more often in our common life together. Just a quick glance through this morning's headlines reveals as much. All these ongoing conversations about voting rights and school curricula and the role of police in our communities and public health protocols and such have at their root questions about authority and power and the exercise thereof.

Questions of power and authority are not only underlying questions in our day and time – they are questions at the heart of our story this morning from the Book of Acts.

## III

This summer, we're reading and preaching our way through the Acts of the Apostles, or simply Acts for short. Thus far in our reading, all of the action has been set in or near the city of Jerusalem.

And there in Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit is on the move. In just the past few weeks, we've seen the Spirit shatter the barriers of language. We've seen the Spirit cause the lame to walk and the and wounded to be made whole. We've seen the Spirit inspiring ordinary people to extraordinary acts of hospitality and generosity, so much so that through the church, the deathly grip of poverty is being broken.

But not everyone is happy about it.

Already, two of Jesus' disciples have been hauled before the city rulers and asked, "By what power or authority are you doing these things?" And when they

said they were doing these things by the power and authority of Jesus Christ, they've been sternly warned not to speak the name of Jesus anymore. But they went right on doing it anyway.

And that brings us to our story for today.

*Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life." When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.*

*When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have them brought. But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; so they returned and reported, "We found the prison securely locked and the guards standing at the doors, but when we opened them, we found no one inside." Now when the captain of the temple and the chief priests heard these words, they were perplexed about them, wondering what might be going on. Then someone arrived and announced, "Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!" Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people.*

*When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."*

*When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. But a Pharisee in the council named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. Then he said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody, and a number of men, about four hundred, joined him; but he was killed, and all who followed him were dispersed and disappeared. After him Judas the Galilean rose up at the time of the census and got people to follow him; he also perished, and all who followed him were scattered. So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be*

*able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”*

*They were convinced by him, and when they had called in the apostles, they had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Who has authority, and why? Who has power, and how it exercised?

Before his death and resurrection, Jesus once overheard his disciples having an argument about who among them was the greatest. But Jesus responded, in Ryan’s revised translation of the Greek, “In my kingdom, if you want to become the greatest, you must be willing to be the least of all and servant of all. In my kingdom, the way to climb to the top is to intentionally move to the bottom. In my kingdom, if you want to be my follower, you’ve got to lay down your self and pick up a cross. In my kingdom, those who are in it for themselves and their own power and glory will lose it, but those who willingly lay down their power for my sake and the sake of my kingdom will live.”

To me, this is one of the most compelling things about the gospel, because it’s so counterintuitive. From the earliest age, most of us learn how to navigate the power dynamics of this world. On the

playground, we learn that “Might makes right,” and “The one who rules makes the rules.”

But Jesus takes all of our human assumptions about power and authority and turns them upside down. The scandal of the cross is that the Messiah, the long-promised and long-awaited king, the one who will rule over Israel forever, willingly laid down his power and authority on Calvary’s hill.

And now in Acts the power of the Spirit is on the move through the church. The lame are being made to walk again. New ways of exercising hospitality and generosity are breaking the deathly grip of poverty. The kingdom of God is beginning to poke through the cracks.

But the high priest and the Sadducees, who don’t believe in this resurrection business, which is why they are Sad-U-See, are jealous and want to quash this Jesus movement once and for all.

But Gamaliel wisely advises them to let it play out. Because if this is just another flash in the pan, if this movement is of human origin, it will flame out like so many other movements that have come before. But if it’s of God, then no one will be able to stand against it.

#### IV

Who has authority, and why? How is power exercised, and on behalf of whom?

And what about you?

Perhaps you are in a position of leadership in a business or in government

or in a nonprofit organization. Perhaps you are in a position of leadership in your family. All of us, no matter what our age or station in life, have some amount of power and authority. It may be small and very localized, or it may not, but all of us have some.

Sometime this week, my friend, you will be in a position to exercise power and authority. So the question is, how will you use it?

Remember, my friend, in the kingdom of God, power is meant to be exercised in service to others. In the kingdom of God, the way up is down. In the kingdom of God, those who would become the greatest must become the least of all and servant of all.

As a wise preacher from Georgia reminds us, "Life's most important and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?"

## V

Of course, the briefest of surveys of history tells us that the church has not always done well when it comes to handling power and authority. The church is God's instrument on the earth, but it's also made up of humans, and we know that we have a tendency toward idolatry and tyranny.

But when the church gets it right, the church gives a glimpse of what it looks like for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, as Jesus taught us to pray.

About 80 years ago, in France and Holland and all across Europe, followers

of Jesus exercised their God-given power and authority to hide their Jewish neighbors from a murderous Nazi regime, and in doing so, they demonstrated the kingdom of God.

About 60 years ago, at the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, followers of Jesus exercised their God-given power and authority and suffered dishonor for the sake of the name, and doing so, they demonstrated the kingdom of God.

About 40 years ago, in South Africa, followers of Jesus exercised their God-given power and authority and refused to accept apartheid as normative for their common life together, and in doing so, they demonstrated the kingdom of God.

And for us, for we who live out our discipleship in Jesus Christ in this branch of the body of Christ called First Presbyterian Church of Athens in 2021, every time we exercise the power and authority that God has entrusted to us to lift up the lowly, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and declare the year of the Lord's favor, this church, too, becomes more and more of a visible sign of the kingdom of God right here on earth.

May it always be so.

Amen.