

THE CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION: CONFESSING CHRIST

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Acts 5:27-32

Today, I would like to begin by talking about two churches that have been in the news lately.

During the season of Lent, as you will recall, I preached a sermon series on five classic Christian spiritual practices: fasting, solitude, simplicity, almsgiving, and prayer. These are practices that can help us grow stronger in our faith and draw us nearer to God.

One church in Chicago chose to fast for Lent but took a unique approach. Instead of giving up chocolate or ice cream or sodas, this church tried something different. The name of the church is First United Church of Oak Park. It is called United because the current congregation is the result of a merger in 1975 between First Presbyterian Church and First Congregational Church. This year, on Ash Wednesday, the church placed a banner in front of their building announcing that for Lent the congregation was “Fasting from Whiteness.”¹

The idea is simple. For worship during Lent, they would only sing hymns that were written or composed by people of color—African Americans, indigenous people, people from around the world. In addition, the pastor offered Bible studies on anti-racism. According to the pastor, the purpose of this Fast from Whiteness was, “to take the white perspectives out of the center and allow other perspectives to have space.” The congregation of First United is mostly white. The town of Oak Park, a suburb of Chicago, is 69% white.²

This Fast from Whiteness may sound odd. You may even find it offensive. But all they are doing is saying, “We’re going to take our beloved Handel and Mozart and Hal Hobson and set them aside for a couple of weeks so that we might intentionally celebrate other voices.” That’s it. Swapping out a couple of hymns. It’s like a radio station saying, “Instead of Top 40 we’re going to play some great music you may not be familiar with.” But it caused a stir.

Personally, I applaud the church for this creative fast, for putting a potentially controversial sign out front for all to see. They did this as followers of a Jesus who called that all be loved equally.

¹ <https://www.firstunitedoakpark.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/April-7-2022-Press-Release.pdf>

² <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2022/4/8/23016850/oak-park-pastor-fasting-whiteness-lent-race-diversity>

Sadly, there was pushback from the church's fast. A website called TurningPointUSA posted an article criticizing the church's decision. This was shared among other media and, as a result, First United received countless angry, hateful messages—over 1000 in just one day alone. Comments on the internet labeled the church's actions as “wokeness gone mad” and “reverse racism.” One caller left a threatening voicemail calling the fast “insanity” and threatened to show up at the next service “with some of his buddies.” In concern for their safety, the church was forced to cancel their in-person worship for Palm Sunday. They held worship online.³

The second church that I would like to talk about is the Russian Orthodox Church. Most of us consider the greatest division in the Christian Church to be between the Protestants and the Catholics. It is not. The greatest rift is between the eastern church and the western church—a split that occurred in 1054 between the church in Rome and the church in Constantinople. The eastern church is known as the Orthodox Church and today it is comprised of fifteen branches based largely along national lines. These include the Greek Orthodox Church, the Polish Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and others.

The nation of Ukraine, as we are far too aware, was invaded by Russia less than three months ago. Most of the people of Ukraine identify themselves as Christian. Most of those are members of the Russian Orthodox Church given Ukraine's historical association with the old Russian empire.

However, since the start of this recent war, the leader of the Russian Church, known as the Patriarch, has been a vocal supporter of the Russian invasion on Ukraine. He has bestowed blessings on the Russian army and cast the war as a holy struggle to protect Russia from western scourges. In the past, he has been a vocal supporter of President Putin as the church receives vast financial resources from the government. The Patriarch has preached a series of sermons and speeches saying that Russian is battling the Antichrist and encouraging Russians to rally around the government. The Patriarch has called this war sacred. Not surprisingly, many Orthodox Christians around the world have condemned the Russian Patriarch for promoting war and violence, especially as it affects his own followers in Ukraine.⁴

In the New Testament, the Book of Acts opens with Jesus' ascension into heaven and his directive to his followers to be his witnesses across the world. The book then traces the growth of the emerging Jesus movement, a movement we call the church. Acts then tells us of the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus' followers and thousands were baptized. We read of the power of

³ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2022/4/11/23020749/oak-park-church-threats-lent-fasting-whiteness-theme-online-only-services>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/18/world/europe/ukraine-war-russian-orthodox-church.html?searchResultPosition=1>

the Holy Spirit as it is revealed in healings and miracles. In chapter 4, the followers of Christ begin to pay the consequences for preaching the name of Jesus and are arrested. The charge against them is *proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead*. Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin—the High Council of Jerusalem—to explain their actions. Peter proclaims that their acts of healing are performed *in the name of Jesus Christ*. He goes on to say, *There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved*. The Council was forced to let Peter and John go free. Meanwhile, the church continued to grow.

Our reading for today is the middle part of a longer story in chapter 5. In Jerusalem, the apostles of Christ have continued to perform public acts of healing and casting out unclean spirits. Finally, the High Council can take no more and they have the apostles arrested and placed in jail. However, during the night, an angel arrives and unlocks the doors of the jail and instructs the apostles to go and preach at the temple.

The next morning, the Council gathers and sends for the prisoners. The guards return and report that the doors of the jail were locked but the prisoners are missing. Then, a messenger arrives and announces that the prisoners are actually in the temple preaching to the people. The guards are sent to bring the apostles directly to the Council.

Once the apostles are back in custody, the High Priest says to them, *We gave you strict orders not to teach in the name of Jesus, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching*. Peter responds telling the council, *We must obey God rather than any human authority*. Peter goes on to say, *The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus and exalted him at his right hand that he might give forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses to these things*.

This reading for today, begins a four-part series of sermons called The Church of the Resurrection. If the church is comprised of the followers of Christ, then what sort of entity should it be? What is it directed to do? What must it do to be the church of Jesus Christ?

The answer is quite simple. As we see in this passage, to be the church we must confess Christ. We must preach and teach and act as if the Holy Spirit gives us power. We must be willing to stand up to the human authorities even when threatened, punished, or persecuted. To confess Christ is not just to teach the faith about Jesus, but to act in his holy name, to obey his commands, to take a stand as a body against racism, injustice, inequality, hatred, violence, and war. We must do this when it is uncomfortable, unfashionable, unpopular, and unadvisable. The church is to broadcast Christ's unique message of love, compassion, and forgiveness. If we are that church, then we must be willing to confess Christ with a loud and clear voice.

As I mentioned earlier, our reading is only the middle part of the story. First, the apostles were arrested, second, they were brought to the council, and third, a Pharisee, a member of the council named Gamaliel, speaks up. Gamaliel points out that false leaders come and go. He cites several examples. He suggests freeing the apostles and letting them be. If this Jesus that they follow is only a man, the movement will fail. If, however, it is of God then it will succeed and we, he says, don't want to be on the wrong side of God.

The Council is convinced. They call the apostles back in, have them flogged, and then order them to keep quiet. The apostles depart but continue to preach and teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.

Gamaliel was an astute man. But it is clear that he spoke out because of the strength of conviction of the apostles' message. He could have kept quiet, but their faith swayed him. The church always speak out if we wish to be heard.

First United Church in Oak Park spoke out in the name of Christ, and they suffered for it. They lost their Palm Sunday worship. But they will be strengthened, and they will continue. On the other hand, the Patriarch of the Russian church chooses to side with the powers and principalities of the world over the word of Christ. I can only guess at his motives. But don't appear to reflect Christ.

On a final note, as I mentioned, First United cancelled Palm Sunday Worship because of a threat of violence. The authorities know who called the church because of caller-ID. They haven't taken action because they have yet to determine if a crime was committed. However, on Thursday before Easter—Maundy Thursday—the staff arrived at the church to find a potted Easter lily with a blue bow and a note attached saying, “To the office staff: sorry for the inappropriate voicemail last week.” The note even had a signature—the same name that was on the caller-ID.⁵ When the church confesses Christ and stands by its commitment, lives will be changed.

⁵ <https://chicago.suntimes.com/news/2022/4/14/23025670/easter-fasting-whiteness-oak-park-church-racism>