

Sermon 2020 Easter 2

Text: Acts 5:29-42

Theme: "The Gospel According to Dirty Harry"

One of my favorite actors is Clint Eastwood and of all his characters, Dirty Harry is my favorite. Dirty Harry is an inspector for the San Francisco police department and his trademark is his .44 Magnum. As he is fond of telling everyone who will listen, the .44 is the largest handgun manufactured and it can blow a significant hole through just about anything. In a scene from one of the Dirty Harry movies, Harry has the .44 pointed at the head of a suspect and he comments

"I know what you're thinking. 'Did he fire six shots or only five?' Well, to tell you the truth, in all this excitement I kind of lost track myself. But being as this is a .44 Magnum, the most powerful handgun in the world, and would blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself a question: Do I feel lucky? Well, do ya, punk?"

Now while I could gladly spend the rest of the morning reminiscing about my favorite Dirty Harry lines, I feel obligated at some point to actually connect it to the text. Peter is sort of the Dirty Harry of the Apostles. He would be the one to ask someone "Do you feel lucky, well, do ya punk?" The ruling body of the Jews, ordered the Apostles to stop preaching the Gospel and the Apostles ignore them and do it anyway. Where in the world did those

Apostles get the guts to openly defy the rulers? Remember that these Jewish rulers were not insignificant. They had real power of life and death. They were the governmental authority under Rome in those days when there was still no real separation between church and state.

Well, just like Dirty Harry had absolute confidence in his .44 Magnum, The Apostles had absolute confidence in the message they were given to proclaim, the very Word of God. Jesus had told them to go and make disciples of all nations by Baptizing and teaching and that is exactly what they were going to do. If the governmental rulers of the day didn't like it, too bad. Peter proactively addresses any arguments based on the 4th Commandment by beautifully stating, "We must obey God rather than men!" The 4th Commandment can never be used to impede the Word of God. The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Commandments always trump the 4th – 10th Commandments. First we serve God and then we serve others.

Now that does not mean that following Jesus' directive was easy or that the earthly rulers would not try to enforce their edicts. I am certain that jail was not pleasant for them. In fact, after the rulers were through with them they were flogged. Flogging was horrible. A flogging was being hit 39 times with a whip. The idea of flogging was to give an extremely painful beating, not quite to the

point of death – but close. So don't think the Apostles got off easy. It is true that earlier in chapter 5, they had been put in jail and an angel rescued them, but no angel delivered them when the floggings were administered. It is sometimes painful being a faithful Christian in a sin-fallen world.

And yet, when they were released from jail, those disciples, we are told, left rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for Jesus. They had absolute confidence in the Word. When the miracles came they rejoiced, but when the floggings came, they *still* rejoiced. They rejoiced at all times, in all situations. They rejoiced because they *could* rejoice.

So back to Dirty Harry. How does Dirty Harry stay so calm and collected in all situations? He has absolute confidence in his .44 Magnum handgun. How can the disciples stay so full of joy even in horrible circumstances? They had absolute confidence in the Word of God. Not only do they believe the Word – that is, they believe that the narrative is truthful, but they believe that the Word does what it says it does, that it has power in and of itself. An historical account is not enough. This Word has to do something – and it does. It has power, so use it. Dirty Harry's big .44 Magnum would do him no good whatsoever if he didn't believe it would really fire and so he

never bothered pulling the trigger. It would be useless if he had no confidence in it and so he never loaded it.

According to the Word of God, we carry with us the most powerful tool on earth and we have the most important mission. Now what Jesus promises is that he will be with us always as we complete the mission he has given us, but do you believe that? Do you believe that you have the plan and the tools to complete the plan? Your level of belief is intricately connected to your level joy.

If you really believe that what we do here in worship is mostly just a bunch of repetitious ritual, then I wouldn't expect you to leave here with much joy. If you believe that spreading the Gospel message is someone else's job, then I wouldn't really expect you see the power at work around you because it's not. God says knock and the door shall be opened. Seek and you shall find. He does not say sit and you shall be force-fed. In other words, he will not force this joy upon you. And Satan will work as hard as he can to keep you occupied with anything else, but especially fear and doubt.

God gives us a task to complete while we are on this earth and it is truly the only thing that matters. We are to do what the disciples were doing in Jerusalem – tell about Jesus. Everything we do for fun is secondary. Everything we do for money is secondary. Everything we do for personal enrichment is secondary. And nothing

can get in the way of the primary thing we do. For that is what brings us joy and brings God glory.

Too often we get distracted by things around us as though they were the main things. Satan will use any tool. He's not picky. He will use whatever he can use to pry us away from our service to God. Right now, he is finding great success with fear and panic. He is thoroughly enjoying how successfully he is dividing people who have differing opinions about how to weather this virus. He loves all the rude comments on Facebook and all the nasty gossiping. He is tickled pink with the loss of liberties and income. But we are actively combatting him. People are still attending worship, perhaps in greater numbers than we have seen in years through live streaming. More Christians than ever are in Bible Study via the internet. I have never had 25-30 people in a Bible study I have taught at Trinity, and yet, I am seeing that number for Job on Tuesday nights. While I disagree with blanket governmental restrictions on churches, when have we ever talked so much about religious freedom and when have we ever experienced those freedoms being restricted? Nothing makes the Gospel more powerful than oppression. God is at work here. He is keeping our faith fed through Word and Sacrament and we have only to do what we are called to do and faithfully proclaim his love and mercy to

people who may finally be ready to listen for the first time ever. Don't become distracted. Don't be divisive. You carry the most powerful tool ever wielded by a human being – the very Word of God. Use it to proclaim his love and forgiveness and rejoice in all circumstances.