



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

## First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

### November 10, 2013

#### "Life With a Capital 'L" - Acts 5:17-32

#### The Rev. Dr. Sim Fulcher

**Y**ou may have heard me tell before that my brother, Bill Fulcher, built his life around the game of football—not watching it, but playing it. And he played it extremely well, especially on special teams.

He wasn't big but he was quick. His hallmark was with the kicking team. He would get down the field with such speed and split-second timing that he would knock the ball carrier off his feet the instant he caught the ball.

It's not that he never watched football, because it was in watching it that he ended up playing it. As children, almost every Sunday afternoon during the football season my brother and I with our dad would watch the Washington Redskins—the only professional game we could get on television. The reception, black and white of course, wasn't good on clear days from WSBTV Charlotte, 150 miles away. But when the weather was bad and the signals bounced off the clouds, TV was good. But good or bad we watched the game.

My brother secretly vowed that one day he would play for the Redskins. He did—for two years. Most of the time he was a starter as line-backer and on special teams. He retired from pro ball early and settled down to finish college, due almost entirely to our dad's lecture.

My dad sat Bill down one day and said something like, "Son, I've had enough! I'm putting my foot down. You're going back and finish college before you do another thing. You'll amount to nothing if you don't get your college degree. I don't want you out there playing ball anymore. I want you in school. Is that clear? Do you understand me?" Our father was a trial lawyer and very authoritative. My brother said it was clear and that he understood.

So Bill went back to school and he was doing well. My father was extremely happy to know his firstborn, his namesake, was completing college like he ought to be doing—happy, that is, until one Sunday deep into the football season.

Our father was in his accustomed place in front of his TV watching the Redskins game. He leaned back in his chair smiling within as it appeared Washington was about to execute a crippling play to the opposing team. Then he heard it—the shrill voice of the hyped up announcer calling the game that day: "It's a long, high Washington kick and the ball is going to taken by—whoops! He's upended on the spot by an eager Redskin player ...eh...eh, Bill Fulcher! A newcomer to the Redskin roster, but what a tackle! Man, what a tackle!"

My father went ballistic. Our dad almost never used expletives, but if what he said at that moment had been professionally recorded I'm sure the recoding would have been bleeped.

I'm sure the same thing could have been said of the authorities whom we read about a few minutes ago from the passage in the fifth chapter of Acts, because the same sort thing had happened.

Jesus' friends and disciples, called apostles at that point, were doing remarkable things in the courts of the temple. They were leading men and women to faith in Christ. They were healing people right and left and casting out evil spirits—all in the name of Jesus. The crowds were growing and the action was spilling out into the streets. The sick were even being brought in from the Jerusalem suburbs.

Finally the religious authorities got fed up. They rounded up the apostles and said to them in essence, "We've had enough! We don't want you out there in the temple courts anymore talking about this one you've come to think hung the moon. Do you understand that? You're disrupting the whole city with this nonsense. Is this clear? Do you understand what we are saying? To make sure you won't be out there we're locking you up."

**S**o they called in the police and had them all put in jail.

This Council of religious authorities no doubt slept well that night, happy knowing these men were no longer in the courts of the temple talking about this Jesus person. They were happy they didn't have to worry about police reports that included statements having to do with something called the Holy Spirit—whatever that was. They were happy, that is, until the next morning.

The authorities on the Council had just eaten breakfast and had gathered to discuss what they were going to do with these people they had locked up all night. They were probably into their second cup of coffee when a man burst into the room. "Hey guys! Gave you seen the morning news?"

They had not. So they switched on the TV (there was no remote in those days and it was black and white for sure), and there on the screen, live, in the temple square, were the friends of Jesus doing the very things they were told not to do. They were talking about Jesus, healing people, and telling people that Jesus would not only give them a whole new life but He had power over death.

I'm sure expletives must have been expressed by these religious authorities, but the Message Translation has them saying, "Hey, what's going on here, anyway!?"

We know what was going on. We are told that in the middle of the night an angel of God had come into the prison compound, unlocked the doors, let the apostles out on to the street, and then locked the doors back again.

All this was done while the security guards were at their posts, yet it was done without their knowledge. The guards had no clue as to what was going on. In fact, when the police came to take the apostles to court for their hearing they found the guards standing staunchly in their places guarding empty cells.

We are further told that this angel of God had gathered the apostles together outside the prison gates. And like a football coach at half time, he gathered these apostles around him and told them to go out and stand in the temple court and tell the people the whole message of "this new life." So they went...and that's exactly what they did.

And for the second time the police rounded up the apostles and brought them to the High Council. And for the second time the Chief of the Council said, "We have told you repeatedly with strict orders not to teach in the name of this one you follow, yet you have filled Jerusalem with your propaganda about him." (They refused to refer to Jesus' by name. They were jealous of His popularity and denied Him even that dignity.)

One of those apostles was Peter. Peter stood and said words close to these: "Sorry Mr. Chief Priest, but we must obey God above any human authority, and God has told us to do what we are doing. You see, God raised up Jesus after you killed Him and exalted Him at His right hand as a Leader and the Savior of his people that He might give the forgiveness of sin."

The Council was furious. They had to be calmed down by one of their own, who was somewhat sympathetic with the disciples.

That's the picture here. And here's the question for us: Can we, 2,000 years later, take away something from that day to help us on this day as we, like those early Christians, attempt to live our lives in Christ?

### **Be Faithful**

I think we can, and the first thing that comes to mind is that these Christians were faithful. They were faithful to what God called them to do. No matter what obstacles and hardships they faced and even when there was no chance of winning the day, they were still faithful to God's calling. God said, "Go!" They went. It's as simple as that.

You know, we talk and sing a lot about God's faithfulness, and we should. We can't do enough of it because He is faithful. But we need to know God is looking for us to be faithful, too. He is looking for faithful people He can trust to do his work. Paul, writing to Timothy, said: "*I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.*" (I Timothy 1:12)

Note that Paul's strength came from Christ, but the faithfulness was Paul's. Whenever I converse at length with people in the business world who own their business or who have people they manage, there is one sentence that is almost always bound to come from their lips. They will say inevitably "You know, a faithful worker is hard to find."

But that's always been true. Proverbs 20:6 says, "*A faithful man who can find*"? Our house Bible says that verse this way, which is a little more inclusive, "*Many proclaim themselves loyal but who can find one worthy of trust?*"

I've always been impressed reading anything about the 1968 Summer Olympics. It's been called the greatest track meet in history, and it was, up to that time, the most watched sporting event ever. A lot of amazing things happened that summer in mile high Mexico City, but two events stand out for me.

One was the world record long-jump by Bob Beamon of the U.S. The long-jump is an event where champions are separated from the rest of the field by mere inches—often by fractions of an inch. After his jump, Beamon knew he had a record, but he was not prepared for what he would hear when the announcement was made.

He stood on the track as he waited for the officials to convert his metric distance into feet and inches. Then over the P.A. system Beamon heard, "29 feet, 2½ inches." He had bettered the old record by almost two feet—an unheard of achievement! It was a record that would stand for over 20 years. After he heard that announcement, Beamon's legs gave way and he sank to the track—even causing the 400 meter race to be postponed. Doctors said later he had suffered what they called a cataleptic seizure, being shocked into numbness by the magnitude of his own accomplishment.

But you know, as big as that was, there was a later event that to me was even bigger. It had to do with the men's marathon—a 26-mile final event that ended in the stadium. There was a lot of drama. A highly favored Ethiopian runner started out big, then stunned everybody by suddenly dropping out with an injury. His teammate stayed in the race and ended up winning, giving Ethiopia the third win in three years.

However, the big drama didn't happen until the race was over—or thought to be over. It was an hour after the awards ceremony had taken place. The noise had settled down, the darkness had settled in, and the many thousands of people in the big stadium had dwindled down to hundreds—when there was a commotion at the stadium entrance. There were motorcycle sounds, whistles, and flashing lights. The word was passed to the press box then filtered quickly down to those still in the stands. "It's the last runner in the marathon!"

Reporters up in the press boxes dropped the stories they were working on to watch this story develop right before their eyes. Into the stadium came John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania. His leg was bloody and bandaged. Wincing with pain at every step he pressed on. As he made his way around the track the silent crowd began a slow steady clap.

The clapping grew louder and louder as Akhwari made his way toward the finish line. By the time he finally hobbled across that line, the crowd was roaring as if he had won the race. Let's watch just as it happened. (video is shown).

As you heard, John Stephen Akhwari when asked, "Why did you endure the pain when there was no chance of winning.?" First, he looked puzzled. Then he said, "I don't think you understand. My country did not send me to Mexico City to start the race. They sent me to finish the race."

Our cry is, "John Stephen, come work for us. Your skills? We don't care what your skills are. We can teach skills. We can't teach faithfulness. John Stephen Akhwari we need your kind. You are rare indeed!"

Why be faithful? It certainly doesn't earn us salvation. Salvation is free. It can never be earned. Then does it earn us brownie points with God to be faithful. Does it impress God with how wonderful we are? None of that.

We've all heard the funny little remark that if you want to make God smile just tell Him your future plans. That has to do with God's funny little smile. If you really want to make God smile a serious smile from the heart, just be faithful to Him. Trust Him. It absolutely melts His heart. You can see that happen all through Scripture. It's a wonderful thing to please the heart of our loving God who remains faithful even when we are not.

### **Be Fearless**

The second takeaway from this passage is the inspiration to be fearless. I think this is huge. Taking the God of the Bible to the secular world is hugely intimidating. In the Old Testament Jeremiah became petrified even thinking of it. God comforted Jeremiah when he said, "Jeremiah, don't be afraid of their faces. I will be with you. I will take care of you."

It is so easy to be afraid of their faces. I feel their faces every time I bow my head in public to thank God for the food I'm eating. It's easy at those times for me to conjure up the idea that every bad thing ever said against the Christian faith is being thought of me in the minds of those who see me with my head bowed.

I'm a coward at heart. I need the inspiration of these early Christians to stand strong—stand strong when called upon to stand against much more than a silent sneer from a cynical non-believer in a restaurant.

Indeed, later in Acts 5 beyond the passage we read, the apostles are whipped and flogged and yet they rejoice for the honor of being disgraced in the name of Jesus.

I take heart from Peter. It is Peter in this story who stood up to the head of the Sanhedrin Council and said, "Sorry Mr. Chief Priest but we have to obey God rather than any human authority." Did Peter do that? Did Peter say that? Yes, the same fearful Peter who denied with swear words around that charcoal fire that night that he had ever met Jesus.

What got into Peter to make him fearless of the faces of these people? The Holy Spirit is what got into Peter. He was filled with God's Spirit. It was not that Peter felt super-human. It was that Peter had experienced God's power at work through him when he made a stand for God, so he had learned to discount his fears and trust God.

I want to qualify that word "fearless." I think Peter and these apostles still had fears but they had learned to discount their fears, to keep moving ahead anyway, and trust God's Spirit at work through them. They had learned to have courage in the face of fear.

As Peter says in this story the Holy Spirit is with us as we obey God. It's not a matter of feeling the Holy Spirit but of trusting Him to be there.

Mimi and I experienced this one night in a very nice restaurant in Kentucky. Discounting our fears as we almost always try to do, we bowed our heads and gave thanks to God for the food we were about to eat. We felt the faces from the five or six tables around us. We felt a little self-conscious as we often do—like we were being tagged or

labeled. Nothing new for us. I'm sure most of you know the feeling.

Then minutes later an interesting thing happened. We had an earthquake. The walls in the restaurant seemed to shift and the chandeliers began to swing. Suddenly the tremor stopped. Mimi and I looked up and every eye from those five or six tables was fixed on us.

Were they blaming us for the earthquake? That's what it seemed at first, but as their stares turned to more quizzical looks we concluded that we had been labeled as those who just might have a God connection. And at that moment the people must have felt a God connection may not be a bad thing to have. We felt if the tremor had continued those people would have been very open to an impromptu prayer meeting right then and there.

When I think of facing our fears with courage and trusting God's hand upon us my mind almost always goes to John Bunyan's classic book "Pilgrim's Progress." Many of you, I'm sure, are familiar with this allegory written in the 17th Century of the Christian's journey through life— said to be the most printed book ever, other than the Bible.

My favorite episode is when Christian, on his way to the Celestial City, comes to the path called Difficulty. He has been told if he stays in the midst of this path, no matter what happens no hurt will come to him. Two men come running toward him from off the path saying there are wild beasts on the path that will rip him apart if he continues. Christian stalls. He's afraid. He sits down on the path and goes to sleep.

When Christian awakens, it's dark. Now he's doubly afraid. His only choices are to turn back or keep going. He cannot turn back, so he faces his fears and moves forward, angry at himself for stalling so long. The path grows very narrow and steep. He hears doleful creatures all around. He hears the roar of lions. They come rushing at him. They get closer and closer. He even feels their hot breath on his face as they snarl in his ears.

Christian keeps in the center of the path and keeps going. Finally he leaves the snarling and other animal sounds behind him. Dawn breaks. He looks back and discovers the lions are chained. As long as he stayed in the center of the path, he was safe.

Of course, the teaching here is that the safest place to be is in the center of God's will. In God's will we can face any fear with courage.

This raises an important question about our Scripture passage. How could Peter and the apostles be in the center of God's will when they so blatantly broke the law laid down by the civil authorities? We read in Romans: *"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed."* (Rom. 13:1,2)

Let's look at that for a minute because it's important. This Romans passage can be illustrated by a diagram showing a symbol for God at the top. Directly under God is a symbol for Human Authority. Directly under Human Authority and at the bottom is a symbol representing you or me.

## Diagram One

The Romans passage is saying that to stay in God's will in all matters of authority we are to remain under the Human Authority directly over us.

## Diagram Two

It is a biblical no-no to move out from under that Human Authority because the Human Authority is established by God. In fact, if you or I want to know our true attitude toward God's authority it is exactly the same as the attitude we have toward the immediate Human Authority over us.

## Diagram Three

However, there is an exception. It is the exception that occurred for Peter and the apostles in our passage. If the Human Authority moves out from under God's Authority, then we are not to move with it. We remain faithful under God's direct authority no matter what the consequences.

How do we know if the Human Authority has moved out from under God? We cannot know it by opinion or speculation. We can only know it by God's clear revelation.

To backtrack for a moment, how would all of this apply to my brother playing for the Washington Redskins? Would he have been out of God's will seeing that he disobeyed our father—his human authority? Not exactly because my father was no longer my brother's immediate human authority, and my brother was no longer a child commanded to obey him.

However, in a sense, he was out of God's will because though he was no longer a child commanded to obey his father—he was commanded by God to honor his father and he was not doing that. But you need to know that

condition didn't last long. My brother quit the Redskins and soon after finished college with flying colors.

You may be wondering how all this applies to the huge issue that has broiled at our state capital for the past few days, even months. If I went there I would lose you and never get you back for my last point which is brief but the most important of all.

### Be Focused

It's about being focused—being focused on the majors and not on the minors. It comes from verse 20 of our passage in Acts 5. It's the charge to the disciples from the angel God sent to open the prison doors...except that the disciples are now called apostles. The word apostle means "one who is sent." The angel says, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."

That little phrase "this Life" is not translatable because it means "the Gospel," "The Christian Faith," "Salvation through Jesus Christ," "God's Gift of the Holy Spirit," "Eternal Life with God." All of it!

The religions of the world are human attempts to reach up to God and make ourselves acceptable to Him. The Christian faith is not a religion. It is the opposite of that. It is the story of God coming down to us in Jesus Christ and Jesus telling us that it's impossible for us to make ourselves right with God, that He alone can do that. And so He did. And He makes all things new. If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation. The old has passed away. Everything has become new. This is to be the focus of our message to the world.

All of this is packed into that little phrase "this life". Many

translations capitalize the "L." It is Life with a capital "L." For 2,000 years this new Life was prophesied. Now the time had fully come for the whole world to be told. It was a special moment in the history of the church. It's like that angel of God stood there with Peter and the apostles outside that jail cell in Jerusalem, and it was like the angel lifted up his arm and pointed his finger to the world and said, "On your mark, get set, ready, go!"

And that action is still going on and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. There's nothing more exciting than being in on that action. And thanks be to God that's exactly where you and I are today.

Let's pray. O God, give us your grace —grace to be faithful disciples; grace to be fearless apostles; and grace to stay focused on the Good News in Jesus Christ as we represent you in a lost world. In Jesus' strong Name we pray. Amen.

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