



Counted Worthy

Acts 5:27-42

William F. Schnell

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Most people show some discretion when it comes to personal issues in their lives. They don't involve anyone else. They prefer their privacy. Not Schnell's. Everybody knows our business. If you want to know about my financial package, just call the church and ask for an Annual Report—it's broken down in detail. If I have a medical procedure, the gory details should be in the next sermon. If there's any trouble a-brewing, just watch the local news—or the national news. Doesn't matter—it will be on there.

There are some pluses to this approach. We never suffer alone. We avoid certain psychological issues beyond the ones we already have—things like repression, denial and that sort of thing. Occasionally, I guess, we are inspiring in a weird sort of way. Somebody going through a tough time of their own will confide: "You are an inspiration to me." Isn't that a nice thing to say? There is a sign at the Ashland, Ohio exit on I-71 that proclaims Ashland as "The World Headquarters of Nice People." I think Aurora could give Ashland a run at that designation.

Having said that, if somehow navigating a particularly rough stretch on the road of life qualifies us as "inspirations," I think most of us would tend to think: "I didn't sign up to be an inspiration. If this mess is the price for being inspiring I think I'd rather be a bit more mediocre." And with all due respect for Paul's notion of suffering building character, I've got enough character. I don't need anymore. I'll settle for less character if it will make this mess I am in go away.

I don't know if you have ever felt that way, but I have. That is because I can be a real spiritual sissy and I whine a lot. The fact is, we are, as Christians, called to be inspirations. We are called to be lights in a dark world. And thinking we have enough character is a sure sign that we do not and we need more—yes, the kind that suffering brings. Suffering can bring lots of good and needful things in its wake if we recognize it's potential.

In our text the followers of the risen Christ—who, by the way, suffered and was raised to glory—his disciples discover the same spiritual principle applies to them. They have learned to see suffering differently. They recognize the potential suffering has for achieving glory. Indeed, they consider themselves to have been counted worthy in

God's eyes because of their suffering—hence the title of today's message. Therefore they not only learn to embrace suffering, they praise God for it if you can believe that. Let's continue on to our text and see how we can be counted worthy by suffering in the name of Jesus.

The crucified and resurrected Jesus has just ascended to heaven. Certain eye-witness followers of Jesus, called apostles, are spreading the good news like a contagion and infecting an increasing number of Jews with a newfound faith—much to the chagrin of the religious leaders who thought they would be done with Jesus once they crucified him. The religious leaders include the priests, teachers of the law, scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees and so-forth. They are gathered into one council called the Sanhedrin.

Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," he said. "Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man's blood" (Verses 27-28). You will notice how the High Priest never mentions Jesus by name. He refers to *this name and this man's blood*. Otherwise he would rather the world just forget about "that guy."

The apostles, however, answer to a higher authority who has other plans. *Peter and the other apostles replied: "We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree (a figurative way of referring to the wooden cross). God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him." When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death (Verses 29-33).*

It is the height of irony that the religious leaders who presume to be so close to the Almighty are the very ones who most obstruct his ways (of course this applies to back then and not now). Why were the religious leaders so furious? Because they are in the religion business and they are losing market share to the apostles. In the opening chapter of Acts we read: *In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) (1:15).* In the next chapter, which recounts Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost, we read: *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day (2:41).*

By the fourth chapter we read: *...many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand (4:4).* Our text is in the fifth chapter and is preceded by these words: *more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number (5:14).* Finally, just a few verses before our text we read, *...the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy (5:17).* The religious leaders had been jealous of Jesus' spiritual influence over the people, and now they were jealous of his apostles' spiritual influence. As they put Jesus to death, so now they wanted to put his apostles to death.

But a cooler head prevails in the person of Gamaliel, a widely respected Pharisee who brings to mind some other radical religious reformers who, like Jesus, were put to death. Shortly thereafter their followers were scattered and their movements faded away to nothing. *Therefore, Gamaliel concludes, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.*” His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go (Verses 38-40).

Two things. First, it is almost mentioned in passing that the apostles were flogged. Flogging was also referred to as “the 40 lashes minus one” because 40 lashes were considered enough to kill a man. So they found out how much punishment would kill each apostle and then they backed it off a little bit. In short, they had these apostles lashed to within an inch of their lives before turning them loose. So the apostles would have been a bloody mess leaving the Sanhedrin. Second, they were ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus anymore.

Now, I want you to observe what the apostles do when they leave. First, the apostles leave the Sanhedrin rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Beaten and bloody they leave rejoicing. Can you believe it? Why? Because they had been counted worthy to suffer in Jesus’ name. They were walking the Jesus walk. They were walking in the way of the cross which, oh by the way, is also the way of salvation. They associated their witness with the surpassing glory it would achieve for them.

However, they had been ordered not to speak in the name of Jesus. What to do? Well, the apostles have already stated: *We must obey God rather than men!* So our text concludes with these words: *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ* (Verse 42). Arrest me, flog me, persecute me, crucify me but I am going to obey God because God has promised to raise me up to glory with Christ. In God’s eyes I am counted worthy because of my suffering. So, hallelujah, bring it on.

That kind of faith is so contagious. No wonder the early church grew by leaps and bounds. It is inspiring. It was inspiring then and it is inspiring now. Suffering is not an ancient phenomenon. Suffering is part of the human equation. Relatively speaking, I have lived a charmed life: Born into a stable, secure, loving family environment. Raised upper middle class socio-economically speaking. No traumatic incidents of any mention. White. Male. American. Access to education and every head start you can imagine. And still I have had my pants kicked, but good, on many occasions.

The question isn’t whether we will suffer or not in this life. The only question is how we will suffer? Some suffering we will bring upon ourselves by our own folly, and even this serves its purpose in terms of training us in righteousness according to the scriptures.

Other suffering we do not deserve. It is either totally random as in a devastating diagnosis or totally overkill under the circumstances or totally wrong such as suffering for righteousness' sake.

We can try to escape suffering in a variety of ways, none of which works and only compounds our problems in the end. Or we can see suffering differently as the apostles in God's Word to us. It is simply our turn. It is also our spiritual opportunity to be counted worthy in God's eyes as we pass the testing of our faith. And then, as we are raised up to newness of life, either here or hereafter, we become, like the apostles before us, a contagious inspiration of transcendent joy and victorious hope for others who suffer in their own ways.

Someone once wrote: "God didn't promise days without pain, laughter without sorrow, sun without rain, but He did promise strength for the day, comfort for the tears, and light for the way." That is what God promises us. And what have we promised God in return? To serve him only so long as our fragile faith isn't too sorely tested? No, we have promised to serve him to the end and thus to be counted worthy of sharing in his glory. Let us rise with Christ as we witness to our undimmed and undying faith singing, O Jesus, I Have Promised.