

Sunday, May 9th
Sixth Sunday after Easter

HELD CAPTIVE

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen. Through this Easter season we have been looking at the power of the resurrection and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the disciples by Jesus. We have seen that they took Jesus' command to go and make disciples very seriously. We have seen that they taught the people just what Jesus had taught them and that the Holy Spirit had revealed to them the truths of how Jesus fulfilled the Law, the prophets, the Psalms. He gave them the words to speak and brought to their remembrance everything they needed to know; and you might think 'wow, it must have been exciting.' And it truly was but there was a bit of a downside to it too.

In a day and age where we constantly hear about fact checks, here are some biblical fact checks. Of the 11 remaining apostles, because Judas committed suicide; 10 of them were martyred. Only John was not; but he served a lengthy prison term in solitary confinement on the island of Patmos. The replacement for Judas, Mathias, he was martyred for his faith. Mathias is the one that the disciples chose by lot to replace Judas. Of course, Jesus Himself, on the road to Damascus chose Paul. Oh, Paul was martyred for his faith and that persecution and execution of Christians, martyring has continued nonstop.

Just in the last 10 years, we can read about, and hear about pastor Mirada who spent years in my in an Iranian prison. They would kill people because of their faith. They would burn them, pour their ashes on the ground just outside of the prisoner's cells and on the road or the trail to where they were working for the day so the prisoners would walk on the ashes of those like them who had been killed. We read of Kayla Mueller killed for her faith by al Qaeda she was brought in before a group of people to say, here is a Christian who's renounced her Christianity and embraced Islam and she said, 'not hardly.' We can read about 365 of these faithful people in a book, a devotional, put out by Voice of the Martyrs called Extreme Devotion. And there you can read about Palos,

put in a prison in the Soviet Union and threatened over and over with an increasing magnitude to the punishment if he would not renounce his faith in Jesus. And he always would just smile and say, "How can I deny the One who loves me and who I love?"

When we look at all of these people, going back to the disciples, the apostles, all the way up to the modern martyrs, we find that they have some very distinct things in common that they openly said. First and foremost was a love of Christ. They realized that Christ loved them so much that He gave His life for them. And how could they deny someone who loved them that much? But ironically, that love of Christ built in them another love, a love of their captors. I read an article this past week by some doctor of psychology who said that it's just a Christian form of the Stockholm syndrome. That syndrome that affects people sometimes that when they are taken prisoners and held captive; that overtime the prisoners gain an affection, or even a love, or a feeling for their captors. For those of us who can remember back to the late 60s early 70s; Patricia Hearst was an example of the Stockholm syndrome.

But it was not the Stockholm syndrome, not at all. This is the power of the Holy Spirit. They did not, these martyrs; they did not align themselves with their captors. They stood up part from them, but they kept worshipping God. They continued in their kindness. They stood firm in their faith, and they prayed constantly even for their captors whose actions they did not ever support. These are cases of overwhelming love and it's an overwhelming love that is the fulfillment of our gospel this morning. It is what Jesus taught them.

Last week we heard Jesus say, "I am the true Vine, abide in me, abide in my word, I will abide in you and you will bear much fruit." But after saying that you will bear much fruit, He goes to the third abide. So as Paul Harvey would say, 'here's the rest of the story.' Let's put the abide business, the 'I am the true Vine,' into context. This is after Judas left. This is after Jesus had celebrated the Last Supper with His disciples. He then took His disciples out of Jerusalem, down into the Kidron Valley to the entrance into the garden of Gethsemane and there He did His final teaching with His disciples. These are His final words. The ones that He wanted to be ingrained in their mind. And so, after saying; 'bear much

fruit,' He continues with; "as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love."

And then He tells us how to abide in His love. Number 1, keep my commandments. What Jesus said we should do, we should do. And now that takes us back to the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus addressed all Ten Commandments. They are all to be followed at an even stricter level than what the Old Testament teachers taught. It's not just, 'don't murder, don't hate. It's not just don't commit adultery, it's don't lust. He did not wipe away any of the commandments out of social concern. No, He enhanced them. He amplified them. So, if we are going to abide in His love, and His love for His father, He kept those commandments perfectly. If we love Him, we are to keep them perfectly. We know we won't, that's why He came. We are to do our very best and rely on the Holy Spirit to continue to strengthen us to do better and better with each day.

And the 2nd command, "love one another as I have loved you." And that's where we get that greater love has no man than this, than a man lay down his life for his friend. That is what Jesus did and that is what we are to do; is love one another with that kind of love. That we will sacrifice ourselves for each other. Jesus continues and again what He says is very contrary to what we hear nowadays, and many times within Christianity. He continues and says and listen carefully to this; "You did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that you go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide." We didn't choose Jesus. He chose us. He chose to die for us. He chose to make us His own. He did the choosing. The only way we come to Christ is through the power of the Holy Spirit, who makes us aware that we have been chosen, and we stop rejecting.

Now that leads to our New Testament reading today; fruit that abides, abides in His love. It abides in Christ, it abides in His word, and it abides in prayer. But it abides in His love and it abides in our life, so that others may see it. In our New Testament reading this morning, there is a gentleman, his name is Cornelius. He was a Roman centurion of the Italian cohort. A cohort is 600 soldiers, so he may have been a centurion over 100 of the 600. He may have been the centurion that

oversaw the six centurions, who oversaw the cohort. We don't know exactly, but we know this, he is a Roman soldier. He is a member of an occupying force. But we also read that he was a devout man who feared God. And his whole household feared God too. That he gave alms generously and he prayed continually to God.

In one of those times of prayer, an Angel of the Lord came to him and told him to get Peter. He is staying at the home of Simon the Tanner, down by the sea, which would be Joppa. And so, he sent two of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa, to get Peter just as he was told. Meanwhile in Joppa, Peter at noon, goes up to the rooftop to pray the midday prayer. And as he is praying is given a vision; a vision of this large blanket coming down out of heaven and in it all sorts of birds and reptiles and animals all of them unclean. And a voice from heaven says, 'Rise Peter kill and eat.' And this occurs three times. It's a very godly, trinitarian event. And all three times Peter says, 'By no means Lord, for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' But it's after the third time that God says to him 'What God has made clean, do not call common or unclean.' In other words, Christ came and died for all of us and if someone quits rejecting that call of salvation, they are clean. And so just as Peter finishes this prayer time, these visions, and he's wondering what this means; he hears you know a 'bing-bong' or a knock on the door. Ring doorbells, weren't invented yet, so he couldn't look at his phone to see who it was. But he goes down and the servants tell him or the people in the house tell him there are three men here and they are looking for you. OK, now remember this; this is a time when the church has started to come under persecution. There are three men here looking for you, one of them is a soldier. What do you think is going through Peter's mind? He is probably thinking uh oh, they have found me. But the Lord tells him; 'there's three men there, go with them without hesitation. I've sent them. Peter opens the door and tells them I'm the one you're looking for. I think there's still a little bit of a question mark in his mind because he then asks them, 'what is the reason for your coming?' Because normally again if you have a police officer show up with two people that aren't wearing officer's clothes, you'd probably think police officer, two undercover police officers, why are they here? Am I suspected in a crime? And in Peter's case, they were beginning to persecute Christians.

They tell him 'we're from Cornelius, an Angel spoke to him, they told him to send us to come to this house. We're supposed to come and get you so that Cornelius can hear you. Really? You just trying to get me to go, maybe Peter thought it was a ruse. I don't think so because we see that he immediately invited them in as his guests and immediately the next day they went. It wasn't just Peter who went. Some of the faithful who were there in Simon, the tanner's house went with him. They went too, they were going to abide in God's word and in Christ's love. When they get to the house of Cornelius, here this man in authority, a Roman centurion of stature, immediately falls down on his knees and he begins to worship Peter. Peter's response is immediate; stop, stop, stop! Stand up, for I too am a man. He's saying, "I'm not a god don't worship me!" Boy, could we learn the lesson on that! I could go on a tangent for five sermons on that. On problems with people within politics, within the church, within jobs; I mean you name it, who accept praise and all of this as if they were God. Peter says, 'no, there's only one person who deserves praise, that is God!'

And he immediately launches into sharing the gospel sharing the message that Christ had taught him. It is a fulfillment of what he was commanded to do, to testify to bear truth, to bear witness to bear fruit. As he did this, we have a mini Pentecost the Holy Spirit comes down on Cornelius and his entire household. They begin speaking in tongues and Peter looks at this and says, "Well if the Holy Spirit is coming on the Romans, the occupying force, the ones who are going to commit atrocities against Christianity, the ones whose emperor says he is God. If the Holy Spirit comes on them and they believe, what is to prevent them from being baptized? Get some water.

Now I want you to just think about that for a moment. They are in Cornelius' house and you know get some water. Houses back then didn't have running water, and swimming pools and hot tubs or any of that. This is one of our strongest cases for you don't have to be fully immersed to be baptized. It is not the water that's doing the work, it's the Holy Spirit. Get some water. They probably just got a picture of water, sprinkled it on them and said, "I baptize all of you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." What we see here is the love that Jesus taught, love of those who had crucified Jesus, love of those who

were starting to crucify and kill the Christians, love those whose leader is claiming to be God, love of those individuals apart from all that, because they too are part of God's creation. Jesus died for them. Peter as abiding in Christ's law.

Yes, the Romans were an occupying force that basically held the people of Israel captive. But Peter was held captive by God's love, by Christ's love. When you are held captive by that love, you cannot help love like Him, love for Him and love all those He desires to be saved.

In His Name, Amen.