

Natalie W. Bell  
 October 4, 2020  
 World Communion Sunday

**Opposition as Opportunity**  
**Acts 5:19-42**

*After the apostles were healing many sick people and spreading the good news..*

*Then the high priest took action; he and all who were with him (that is, the sect of the Sadducees), being filled with jealousy, <sup>18</sup> **arrested** the apostles and put them in the **public prison**. <sup>19</sup> But during the night **an angel of the Lord opened** the prison doors, brought them out, and said, <sup>20</sup> **“Go, stand in the temple and tell** the people the whole message about this life.” <sup>21</sup> When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching.*

*When the high priest and those with him arrived, they called together the council and the whole body of the elders of Israel, and sent to the prison to have (the apostles) brought. <sup>22</sup> But when the temple police went there, they did not find them in the prison; ... Then someone arrived and announced, “Look, the men whom you put in prison **are standing in the temple and teaching** the people!” <sup>26</sup> Then the captain went with the temple police and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people. <sup>27</sup> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, <sup>28</sup> saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,<sup>[c]</sup> yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” <sup>29</sup> But Peter and the apostles answered, **“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”**<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>30</sup> The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. <sup>31</sup> God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. <sup>32</sup> And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.” <sup>33</sup> When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them. <sup>34</sup> But a Pharisee in the council named **Gamaliel**, a teacher of the law, respected by all the people, stood up and ordered the men to be put outside for a short time. <sup>35</sup> Then he said to them, “Fellow Israelites,<sup>[e]</sup> consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. <sup>36</sup> ...<sup>38</sup> So in the present case, I tell you, keep away from these men and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will*

*fail; <sup>39</sup> but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!”*

*They were convinced by him, <sup>40</sup> and when they had called in the apostles, they had them **flogged**. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. <sup>41</sup> As they left the council, **they rejoiced** that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. <sup>42</sup> And every day in the temple and at home<sup>[f]</sup> they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah.<sup>[g]</sup>*

In his book, *Acts: Catching Up With the Spirit*, Matthew Skinner says that sometimes **opposition and conflict actually help us** understand who we are, our identity, our values, and our priorities—and what we’re called to do!

***Do you agree?***

You know how I used **a resistance band** for the kid’s sermon to demonstrate how sometimes resistance makes us stronger?

It’s a great image because it shows so clearly how resistance can **build muscles**.

What if the very same thing is true for **all of us, and our church?**

Do you see that happening in our story today?

The apostles are arrested by the jealous High Priest, and **imprisoned**.

But an **angel releases** them immediately and sends them back to the Temple to continue preaching the good news!

The opposition they face actually serves as an opportunity to **build up** their ministry and their witness to Jesus Christ!

And after Gamaliel speaks...they are **beaten, flogged, Which causes them to rejoice, and continue their ministry!**

This was the apostles following God, listening to God, above everyone else.

In Acts 5:29 Peter says to the High Priest who had him arrested:

**“We must obey God rather than any human authority.”**

Even Gamaliel admits that the apostles might be following God—and if so, they can’t be defeated!

Before we go on, I want to say a word about the text.

In Acts 5, like much of the book, we see ***'The Jews' being blamed*** for persecuting the early church—but remember, pretty much all the characters, ARE JEWS. Those that are persecuting are a small group of Jews. If we read this to mean that Judaism and Christianity are enemies, we are misinterpreting. And such misinterpretation has been used to support anti-semitism. So, let's remember—Jesus, his disciples, and most early followers, were Jewish. We should not fall into the trap of reading any of Scripture the wrong way.

Now--Can you think of a time when ***you faced opposition or hardship***,  
And ***God used it as an opportunity*** for you to grow,  
and do even more than you thought possible?

For me, I think of different ***hardships*** in my life,  
With my health, my kids, my family,  
And how God used those times to actually help me grow—  
and hopefully become a better person and pastor,  
More empathetic and understanding.

When I think about coming up against ***opposition***,  
Especially as a woman in ministry, in a field of mostly men,  
I believe God has used it, to help me work harder and smarter,  
And be more inclusive of those who are left out and left behind.

***What about you?***

***When has opposition created opportunity for you?***

***In Acts 24-25, Paul is imprisoned*** by the Romans for four years.  
You would think that would be demoralizing, depressing, the end of his ministry.  
But actually, that opposition served as an opportunity for him---  
he used his time in prison to preach to the Roman officials! Wow!  
(This is actually a theme throughout the Bible—think of Joseph).

I wonder what are some ***sources of opposition and resistance***  
to the church today,  
Things that could actually make us stronger?

One thing is, ***we don't live in a Christian nation***, despite the longing for it,  
And the political rhetoric around it.

In fact, ours has not been an explicitly Christian nation, the founders believed in  
the separation of church and state.

But, the church used to enjoy the benefits of being a majority voice in America.  
And people used to be in church on Sunday mornings as a matter of course.  
But not today.

***According to the witness of Acts, this could be a GOOD thing!***

It could make us stronger.

What if God uses that to help us become more ***creative*** at church?

More ***flexible*** in our programs and worship?

Thinking more about those outside our walls?

We've already had to adapt a lot during COVID, by moving so much ***online***—  
what if there is a ***blessing*** in that?

Aren't we reaching more people that way? A different audience?

People that might not darken the doors of a church?

And what if adapting during COVID ***helps us adapt in other ways?***

What might that do for our church, and our witness to Jesus Christ?

I think of the ***Blessing Box*** this way.

It's us adapting to a need--a way for us to ***feed people during coronavirus.***

But it's also a witness to Jesus Christ.

We are feeding people in the name of Christ.

Every time people drive up to that box, they are driving past our church,  
the faith community that cares for the box and everyone who uses it!

So let's make the most of this opportunity to serve our community!

Our ***Garage and Toy Sale*** is coming up later this month—

And despite COVID, hopefully we can make the most of that opportunity,

Because this is a sale that typically helps needy families buy gifts and household  
items, especially at the holidays.

Friends, when we take the resistance, the opposition, the hardships—  
***And allow God to use them,***  
That's when we grow stronger.  
That's when our lives yield even more fruit.

May we ***surrender to God, the places of opposition and resistance,***  
In our lives, and in our church,  
And may God use that to grow us in ways we could never imagine.

That is the ***Good News of the Gospel*** for us today.  
And for this, all God's people say, Amen.