**By What Authority**

**Acts 5:27-32**

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Do you remember what you were doing in April 1963? Granted, that was 55 years ago, so memory may be a little sketchy. For many of you there may be no memory at all because you didn’t exist.

If you are a senior citizen, you might have watched the debut of the long-running soap opera General Hospital. If you are a baby boomer, you might have purchased the first album put out by the Beatles, Please Please Me.

And as I said, if you are a member of Generations X, Y or Z, 1963 is ancient history – something you only read about in books.

But if you were a leader of the clergy in Alabama in April of 1963, you might remember receiving a strongly-worded letter from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Earlier this month, we in the United States, and around the world, commemorated the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. King. But I was reading an article that was written five years before his assassination. On April 16, 1963, King issued his “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

The civil rights leader was locked up in the city jail after being arrested for his part in the Birmingham campaign, a nonviolent protest conducted by the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. King was president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and had been invited by the Alabama Christian Movement to take part in the protest.

King wrote his letter on the margins of a newspaper, which was the only paper he could find. Bits and pieces of the letter were carried by his lawyers back to the headquarters of the movement. And why did King write the letter?

Eight white Alabama clergymen -- four bishops, three pastors and one rabbi -- had written a statement calling King's efforts "unwise and untimely." They agreed that racial segregation was a problem, but that it should be handled in the courts instead of in the streets. These religious leaders rebuked King for being an outsider causing trouble in Birmingham.

King responded by saying that he was not an outsider because he had ties to the Alabama Christian Movement. But more importantly he said, "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here." All communities and states are interrelated, he asserted, and "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. ... Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." Therefore, "anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider."

Alabama clergy leaders were upset because demonstrations were happening in Birmingham. King acknowledged that the demonstrations were unfortunate, but said, "It is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the [black] community with no alternative."

The church leaders also questioned the timing of the protests. They wanted King to wait and see if a new city administration would improve conditions for blacks. But King responded that for blacks in the United States, the word "wait" had almost always meant "never." They had already been waiting 340 years for their "constitutional and God-given rights." That's too long to wait. King was tired of waiting for human authorities to act. It was time to heed and obey the movement of God.

King, of course, was not the first to practice civil disobedience. He spoke of the Old Testament's Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refusing to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar. He spoke of Socrates practicing civil disobedience in ancient Greece, and American patriots participating in the Boston Tea Party. And, of course, he spoke of the early Christians facing persecution for their faith.

Too often in history, human authority stands contrary to God’s authority. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out when human government runs contrary to the movement of God. And when it does, we as Christians must decide by what authority we are going to live.

This is the story of Peter and the apostles in our Scripture lesson from Acts. They had been arrested for performing numerous healings and for telling the story of Jesus. Their time in jail did not last long, however, because in the middle of the night an angel opened the prison doors and brought them out to continue their teaching. It’s actually a bit humorous the way the story is told. When the Jewish Council convened the next day they went to get the prisoners. The guards were standing at the prison doors. The doors were locked, but when they opened them, no one was there. They were quite perplexed, and I would not have wanted to be one of the guards that were on duty.

And it’s not like the Apostles ran for their lives and were hiding, because at dawn the next day, they were found back in the temple telling people about Jesus. When the Council heard about it they sent the police back to the temple to arrest them again and bring them to stand before the Council.

The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in [the name of Jesus], yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." Or in the words of the leaders of the Alabama clergy, the efforts of the apostles were "unwise and untimely."

But Peter and the apostles answer in verse 29, "We must obey God rather than any human authority.” What’s interesting about this verse is that it is direct contrast to Paul’s admonition in Romans 13 to obey governmental authority, which seems to be oft quoted by those who wish to maintain their personal privilege that comes with any particular government.

It is what the white clergy leaders were telling Dr. King. Obey the law. Things will eventually get better. But King understood that there was a law higher than any human law, and decided to obey God, rather than human authority.

The apostles understood that there was a law higher than any human law and decided to obey God, rather than human authority. A bold and dangerous stand to take, for sure.

But how does anyone know that they are heeding the voice of God? We assume it must have been easy for the apostles. After all, an angel broke them out of jail and told them. You have to believe an angel, don’t you?

But how about for the rest of us? It is a problem. And it was a problem for Dr. King as well. After all, the clergy of Birmingham believed that they were obeying God, just like the high priest and council of Jerusalem.

King addresses this question head-on. He says that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. "I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws," says King, adding that one has not only a legal, but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. As St. Augustine said, “An unjust law is no law at all.”

But how do you know the difference between the two? That's the tough part. King said that a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law."

A just law, according to King is any law that uplifts human personality and dignity. An unjust law is any law that degrades human personality and dignity

Based on this reasoning, he concludes that "all segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority."

Therefore, if segregation is unjust, then King can justifiably urge his followers to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

Peter and the apostles found themselves in the same boat. They believed that all who obey God are obeying his just and uplifting laws.

On the other hand, the leaders at the time wanted Jesus killed. That's an act that degrades human personality, making it an unjust law.

Just laws uplift and unjust laws degrade. What was true in Jerusalem was also true in Birmingham in 1963, and is also true today.

Christians today are certainly going to have different ideas about where to draw the line between just and unjust laws. We're going to make different choices about when and where to practice civil disobedience. We may not all agree with each other, but we do need to support each other in our attempts to follow the guidance of God.

Some will march in pro-life rallies, based on their belief that an unborn child has a right to life. Others will march in pro-choice rallies understanding that it’s complicated and there is more than one life at stake. Some will take a stand for marriage equality, based on their conviction that gays as well as straights have a right to marry. Some will join demonstrations for immigration reform because they are convinced that our current system is unfair and degrading and use a false sense of fear to keep it that way. Some will join a movement to end child sex slavery and human trafficking.

In each of these cases, the challenge is to obey God and fight for laws that uplift human beings. The apostles did this, civil rights leaders did this, and we are called to do this today. We won't always be popular for these stands, and we certainly won't enjoy quick and easy success. We may even encounter resistance, persecution and arrest. But we will have the joy of living out the kingdom of God.

Preaching in Jerusalem led to the jailing of Peter, the death of Stephen, and, finally, a persecution that scattered most of the Jerusalem church. Later in Acts, Paul and Barnabas tell Jesus followers, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22).

Persecution may come. It took the lives of Paul and Martin Luther King Jr., and it may threaten us as well. But obeying God is worth the sacrifice, especially if our actions raise people up and lift us a little closer to the kingdom of God, by whose authority I choose to live.

I pray that will be true for you as well. Amen.