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The United Methodist Church  
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By Belton Joyner, Jr.

September 6, 2015

Text: Acts 4:23-31

After Peter and John were released from prison and from heavy-duty questioning by some of the religious authorities, they “returned to the brothers and sisters...” (Acts 4:23). That’s not surprising, is it? No matter how strongly we witness to our faith in a non-believing world, there comes a time when we want the power and assurance of being with others of the faith. Being Christian is not a lone-star sport!

The gathered Church community prayed that they might speak and live with boldness (NRSV), with complete confidence (CEB), fearlessly (Phillips), with freedom (ENT), courageously (Williams), and frankly (Strong). That doesn’t sound like the prayer of a people who were going into hiding (Acts 4:29, 31).

So, it seems clear that we are to proclaim loudly and frequently and clearly about Jesus. But, wait a minute! After Jesus healed a

## bible+study

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury’s Adult Bible Study Series  
(Disclaimer: This month’s commentary is written before lesson titles are available from Cokesbury.)

man with a skin disease, he told him “Don’t say anything to anyone...” (Matthew 8:4). Once after a crowd had seen Jesus help a deaf man to hear and speak, Jesus “gave the people strict orders not to tell anyone” (Mark 8:36). Then, there was the time Jesus restored life to a child whose parents thought she was dead. Our Lord’s parting words were: “to tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56).

So, what are we to do? On the one hand, Jesus is saying “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19) and on the other hand, Jesus is saying “tell no one what had happened” (Luke 8:56).

Maybe one handle for picking up this dilemma is the very prayer offered in this week’s study text, a prayer for the courage, confidence, and fearlessness (Acts 4:29) to speak. That means we pray for the wisdom and confidence and courage to know how to speak (and live) for our Lord. When the Holy Spirit filled them (Acts 4:31), they spoke with confidence. That does not mean that what they said and did in every circumstance was exactly the same. It meant that they trusted God to lead them to speak with

what was right for a particular situation.

**What Someone Else Has Said:** Paul Scott Wilson (*Preaching as Poetry*, Abingdon Press) has written: “Fresh, faithful proclamation requires imagination and creative engagement of the Bible and our world.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, stir...calm...”

September 13, 2015

Text: Acts 4:34-5:10

The account of Ananias and Sapphira is one of the most bizarre stories in the Book of Acts. They dropped dead after lying about a gift to the Church. Hmmm.

My favorite story—sorry, I can’t resist---about this incident is in Bishop Roy Short’s *History of the Council of Bishops of The United Methodist Church* (Abingdon). In telling about Bishop Warren Candler, Bishop Short wrote: “On one occasion, when preaching at the Louisville Conference, Bishop Candler was talking about Ananias

and Sapphira. He said, ‘Some folks say God killed Ananias and Sapphira for lying. God don’t kill people for lying. If he did, where would I be?’ When the laughter subsided, he added, ‘Standing up here, all by myself, with a house full of corpses and nobody to help me carry them out.’”

We laugh at this because we know that everyone—except, perhaps, you, me, and Bishop Candler!---has, to some degree, the “gift” of exaggeration, understatement, bold-faced untruth, lying through our teeth, misrepresentation, pretension, deception, fudging on truth, omission/commission, false humility, lack of candor---well, you get the idea.

The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was not that they withheld some money from the community pot. Their sin was that they were deceptive about it.

Our sin separates us from God. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23); we just don’t expect it to be as specific as this! No wonder “trepidation and dread seized the whole church” (Acts 4:11) when word

cntd .

### Ways to Keep the Faith When the World Seems Wicked

struggle to find things for which to pray. That is OK. Today may be a time to sit in God’s presence and listen. If you are looking for someone to pray with or for you, be sure to check out The Upper Room Living Prayer Center.

Get some exercise. Take a walk around your neighborhood. Get on your treadmill. Take a class at your local YMCA. Moving your muscles releases endorphins that help you feel good.

Indulge beauty around you. We need beauty and goodness in our lives each day. Recently, there was a trend on Facebook where people shared pictures of flowers to add beauty to what they felt was a barrage of negativity. Find your beauty – flowers, art, music, etc. – and insert it into your day.

Take a break. We live in an age where we can stay connected to the news constantly. Be sure to get away from it for a period of time. Turn off the alerts on your computer or smartphone, and do something else. There will be plenty of news when you return.

As John Wesley preached, “Against hope, believe in hope! It is your Father’s good pleasure yet to renew the face of the earth. Surely all these things shall come to an end, and the inhabitants of the earth shall learn righteousness” (Wesley, John. “Upon Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, 2.” III.18). In the midst of all we are hearing, we believe in hope.

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of this episode began to spread.

Maybe Bishop Candler was right: “God don’t kill people for lying.” But our lack of integrity is a sign of the death of our spirit. Opening ourselves to the erasing power of our Lord’s resurrection, we can find the fresh start that Ananias and Sapphira chose not to accept. Confession of sin opens the door for the breeze of the Holy Spirit’s cleansing power.

**What Someone Else Has Said:** In *The Ten Commandments* (Orbis Books), Sister Joan Chittister wrote: “Lying is what makes us suspect in everything else in life. It isn’t that truth is rewarded; it is that truth needs no reward. Truth is its own reward; it requires no memory, no elaborate explanations, no conspiring confederates, and no fear of exposure. When we lie about the other, it is the sign that there is something we do not like about ourselves. Something’s missing. Something isn’t right.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “O God of the Way, the Truth, and the Life, clear me of the shadow places in my life...”

**September 20, 2015**  
**Text: Acts 5:27-29, 33-42**  
It’s the rabid Duke fan who says something good about the Carolina football team. It’s the Jewish citizen of Jerusalem who goes to bat for a Palestinian Christian. It’s the 5’ 4” John Wesley who towered over the religious life of his day. It’s the homeless man who turns in to the police the loaded wallet he found on the sidewalk. It’s the Nazi prison guard who gives an extra potato to the hungry Jewish child.

Sometimes, the unexpected happens. Sometimes, a good word or act comes from a most unlikely

source. Sometimes, truth or insight or compassion steps out from an improbable place. That is what is happening in this week’s study text.

What are the odds? The apostles are being judged guilty of a capital crime (Acts 5:33): teaching about Jesus and telling how He died for the forgiveness of sins. Who is against them? The Council (Acts 5:27), that in one place—Acts 5:21—is described as “the full assembly of Israel’s elders”---that’s who is against them; you might say “everybody and their army.”

Then, Gamaliel stands up. Everything in that moment must have told the apostles that they were doomed. Gamaliel was a member of the Council, the very group that had charged the apostles. Gamaliel was a Pharisee, the very people who wanted the Law fulfilled with every “t” crossed and every “i” dotted. Gamaliel was a teacher of the Law, someone who would know the loopholes and ins and outs of how to condemn the apostles’ teachings (Acts 5:34).

It is this Gamaliel who finds a way to set the apostles free. In effect, he says, “Why not let God settle this?” (Acts 5:39). What, indeed, are the odds that this man would speak a word that set the apostles free?

Have I missed something God wanted me to hear because it came from someone with whom I disagreed politically? Have I missed something God wanted me to hear because it came from someone I deemed to be theologically bankrupt? Have I missed something God wanted me to hear because I did not expect “someone like that” to have a word from the Lord?

**What Someone Else Has Said:** In *Grace Matters* (Jossey-Bass), Chris Rice speaks of a friend: “Then John used a phrase he’d never used before. ‘The way you grow into God’s love isn’t by making demands of each other,’ he said. ‘You do it by giving each other grace.’ ... He was talking about our undeserved love for each other ... ‘Giving each other grace is looking at people through God’s eyes.’”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of surprises, God of grace...”

**September 27, 2015**  
**Text: Acts 7:2-3,8-10, 17, 33-34, 45-47,53**  
Here is the story of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. So far, so good. It is an account of faithfulness, courage, and all the qualities we admire in martyrs. So far, so good. Hooray for them!

But there is an “oops” in this account. The word we translate “martyr” is *martus*. Guess how that word can also be translated: “Witness.” In the New Testament language the word “martyr” and the word “witness” are one and the same. Oops, indeed. I probably don’t feel called to be a martyr, but how is that different from being called to witness?

One thing I notice in these verses about Stephen’s great testimony before he is stoned to death is the direction Stephen faces as he speaks. I’m not talking about his physical direction—north, east, south, west; I am speaking of the direction of his journey. Here is a man who is facing death and who is ready to claim the heavenly victory God will give him (Acts 7:59). But notice how Stephen spends

those last minutes: looking back.

He looks back to Abraham (Acts 7:2). He looks back to Joseph (Acts 7:9). He looks back to Moses (Acts 7:20). He looks back to Joshua (Acts 7:45). He looks back to David (Acts 7:45). He looks back to Solomon (Acts 7:47). Only after looking back did he have a vision of the gift yet to be given to him (Acts 7:55-56).

During this past week when I recalled so strongly the burial of my beloved Toni four years ago, I was eager to make claim upon the tomorrow God will give. But, in Stephen’s witness (his martyrdom), there is a call to trace the entire journey. It is the presence of God in that journey that gives us the possibility of saying with Stephen, “Lord Jesus, accept my life” (Acts 7:59).

The witness is not just what God has done in my life or even what God has promised to do in my life after death. The witness is of One who has faithfully moved among His people to bring grace, forgiveness, covenant, and victory. Looking back, I say “Thanks be to God.” Such is my witness about tomorrow.

**What Someone Else Has Said:** Karl Barth (*God in Action*, Round Table Press) wrote: “Only God Himself can be God’s witness according to all that the Holy Scriptures predicate of God and (humankind)...In fact, every real witness has known and confessed: God (in God’s action) is His own witness.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Move with us, Lord, as we join this journey You have walked with Your people...”

vip report

DEATHS:

**ELREDGE**,Dodie, wife of Bob (retired) died June 16. Service was held June 18.

**ELLIOT**,Edward C. (retired) died June 26. Service was held July 1.

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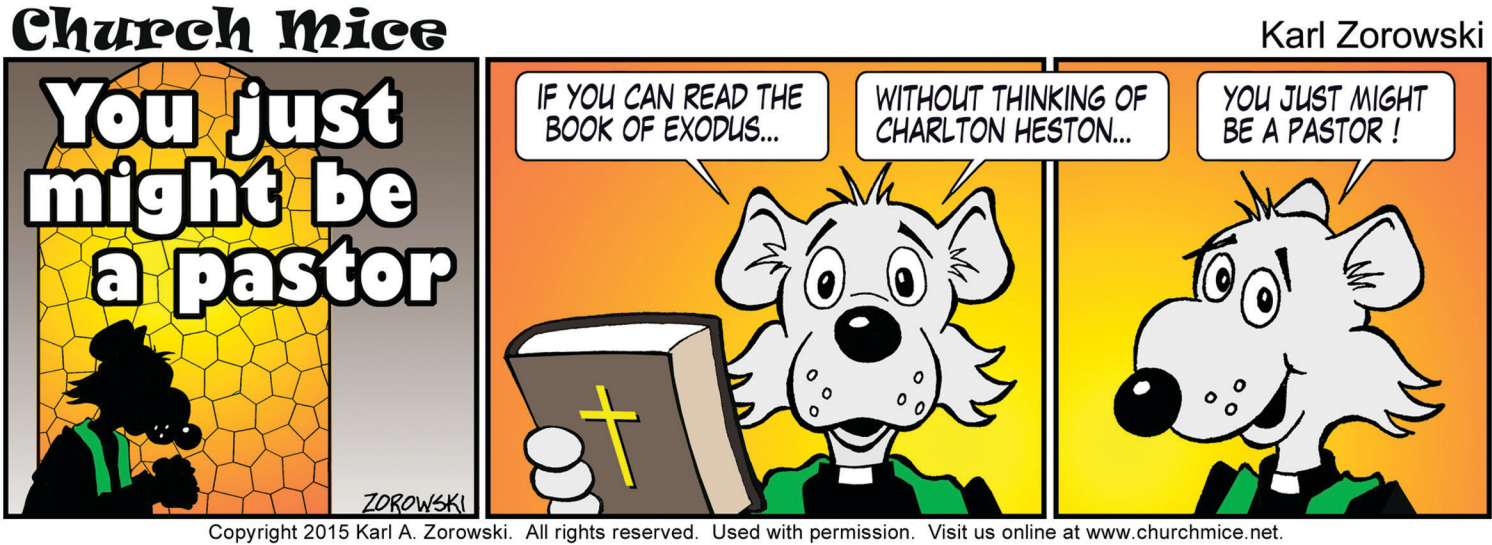
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Ways to Keep the Faith When the World Seems Wicked from Good News Magazine

A UMC.org Feature by Joe Iovino\*

The news can bring us down. There is so much wickedness reported, we struggle to find that which is uplifting. As Christians, we assert that God has created the world to be good, even as we struggle to find the positive.

In times like these we need to remind one another of the hope we know in Jesus Christ. If you find yourself caught in a swirl of negativity these days, here are several suggestions of ways to keep it from becoming all consuming.

Find some good news. While it may seem that there is nothing but bad news, that is rarely the case. Look for positive stories to lift your spirits. For example, take a look at some of these:

TV Weatherman Pastor tells the story of a pastor who delivers sermons and forecasts.

World Record Female Bodybuilder is the story of Ernestine Shepherd, a 77-years-young competitive bodybuilder who has made fitness her ministry.

Pastor used cell phone for graveyard connections is the reflection of a pastor who found a unique way to facilitate graveside conversations for his mom, after the death of his dad.

Read the Good News. Our faith is a story

of hope even in the midst of dark times. Spend some time reading Bible passages about hope and resurrection such as 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 1 Peter 1:3-9, and Jeremiah 29:10-14. Or read through one of the gospels to be reminded of how Jesus brings hope in our struggles.

Give thanks for what you have. In the midst of difficult times, there are still things for which we can be thankful. Take a few minutes to consider all the wonderful ways God has blessed you.

Serve someone. While we may not be able to do much about world issues like disease or terrorism, there are problems in your community where you can be part of a solution. One church, for example, is working hard to create a hunger free ZIP code. Find places in your community to serve people in need.

Get more deeply connected with your United Methodist Church. One of the best ways to combat negativity is to surround yourself with positive people. Finding a group within your church will help keep you grounded in the hope we know in Christ. If you are not connected to a church, use Find-A-Church to learn more about United Methodist churches near you.

Pray. Not only will conversations with other people help elevate our mood, so will a conversation with God. You may *cntd on back page.*



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Phillip Chryst was sent to Wilmington in 2013 with a God-given dream to reach those who had been "turned off by the church, neglected by the church, and indifferent toward the church." The result? A new faith community called **The Anchor**.

The Anchor has had a nomadic life as it reaches those beyond church walls, worshiping in local pubs, in homes and on "The Barge" along Wilmington's waterfront. "We believe in going where the people are, not expecting them to always come to us," says Phillip.

Now it's time for The Anchor to find a home. This Fall they will be securing a permanent worship space with a

\$50,000 grant from **Impact10**. While they are still committed to going where the people are, a home base will allow them to *anchor* many of their ministries and grow a more impacting missional community. The Anchor is going, making disciples of Jesus Christ and transforming their world in the margins. "What else could we be," says Rev. Chryst, "but what this community needs the most in a stormy world? A place where Christ can be the "anchor of our soul."

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