

Sunday, April 7, 2013: Acts 5:27-32 (ESV)

by [Marilyn McEntyre](#) in the [April 3, 2013](#) issue

Disobedience came hard for a nice girl like me. I was taught to respect authority, which I did, despite bumper stickers urging us to question it. I did my homework, kept to the speed limit and came home on time. I rarely got in trouble, though I admired those who did, like the people who joined picket lines or burned their draft cards.

War protests were my first serious encounters with purposeful disobedience. As classmates faced being shipped out to Vietnam, I developed a deep respect for those who heeded the call to disobedience. I watched leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. challenge unjust laws and professors risk censure or worse to speak out against those who controlled the biggest war machine in history. My brother and several friends wrote statements of conscientious objection that helped me see the link between resistance and faith. I began to question authority—who had it, by what right, with what limits. A tectonic shift took place in my theology. I learned to live with more ambiguity and to recognize how the paradoxes at the heart of Jesus' teaching were meant to keep us wrestling with moral complexity rather than simply applying rules. I learned that even legitimately appointed leaders need to be challenged and unjust laws broken.

Discerning when to disobey can be tricky. I'm not sure any of us should undertake it alone; it's much harder than acting on principle, which can lead to a self-righteousness that's sometimes hard to see in oneself when a principle needs defending and we appoint ourselves to the task. When the disciples stand before the high priests they don't invoke principle. They speak from a lived relationship with God, whom they know with an intimacy and certainty that trumps all other claims to obedience. It's not just a spirit of resistance that drives them, but irrepressible love. The logic of that love is fairly simple: here we stand. We can do no other.

I am struck not just by their courage in speaking truth to power but by the simplicity and clarity of their response to accusation. With such clarity there is little need for defiance. Their point is not to argue in their own defense but to bear witness to the one they must obey. *Must* is a key word: what compels them can't be argued away

because it is not matter for argument. Bearing witness is not the same as making a case.

I am even more struck by the disciples' freedom. The high priests don't have power over them; the disciples live outside their jurisdiction: as they are no longer under the law, the agents of the law cannot bind them. No longer afraid of death, they are free indeed. In a few bold sentences they tell a story that is more invitation than defense, offering great good news to the very people who killed their Beloved. Their freedom reminds me of a survivor of three concentration camps who said, "When you've really faced and accepted your own death, you are free." Hers was a powerful testimony to what it might mean to "be not afraid."

The remarkable popularity of Rick Warren's *A Purpose-Driven Life* suggests that we long for a deeper sense of purpose. Discernment of our individual gifts helps define our purposes, but another necessary dimension of the process is to consider our calling to be the body of Christ—to "put on the mind" that cannot be manipulated by propaganda or threats of political retribution. Love provides the sense of purpose that enables us to say, as the 12-year-old Jesus did, "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" That business agenda is fairly simple: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with our God—and speak truth to power because the truth is good news. Also, challenge those who imprison and torture the innocent, who expropriate land and means of production from the poor, who profit from war or slave labor, who traffic in the bodies of women, who destroy soil, water and mountaintops or sell weapons to oppressors. Our business is liberating ourselves and others from lies into truth and from greed into generous love.

I am grateful for those who stand like the disciples in holy disobedience before wayward authorities. On his recent Do the Math tour, Bill McKibben urged divestment from companies that feed our addiction to fossil fuels. He invited us to imagine floating in a small vessel near the mighty oil tankers whose payloads have destroyed so much habitat and then imagine "turning the ship around." A self-described "professional bummer outer," McKibben delivered his painful message about the state of the earth with good cheer, still confident that light shines even in the great darkness of our time.

He is not alone, and we are not. I take comfort in the company of many whose clarity clarifies my own purposes and whose love of God reignites my own: journalists like Amy Goodman, Chris Hedges and Robert Fisk; writers like Wendell Berry, Barbara Kingsolver and Mary Oliver; activists like John Dear and Helen

Caldicott; teachers, pastors, laborers and doctors without borders who are anchored in conviction. I need their clarity. I think of the disciples standing together before the high priests as an image of solidarity that will see them through even their singular and violent deaths, members of one body that may be crucified but not defeated. Hope is hard if you're awake and politically aware, but it has its harbingers, whose vigorous and holy disobedience points a way to wild possibilities.