

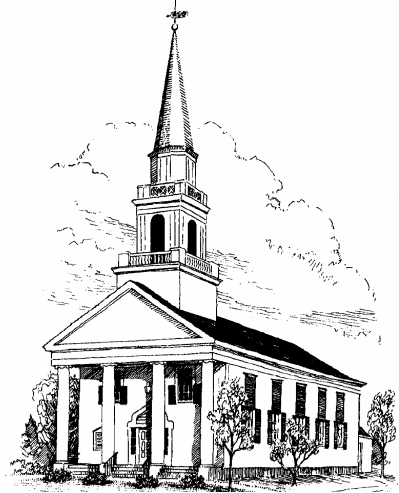
# Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

## Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from April 11, 2010

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg  
“Higher Authority”

Scriptures:  
Revelation 1:4-8  
Acts 5:27-32



Clearly, the strategy did not work. Just months ago, upon hearing about Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead, I called a meeting of the council, the chief priests and the Pharisees, this same council, in this same place, to figure out what we were going to do about this man Jesus who was performing many signs. I was high priest then, too, and I remember all of them saying at the meeting: "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But I, Caiaphas, said to them, 'You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed.' ... So from that day on we planned to put him to death.

We were caught in the middle between having to answer to Rome and keeping the locals in check, and, really, the only way we saw to keep things under control was to kill this insurrectionist Jesus. So we managed to make that happen, but apparently, it didn't work. Sure, his disciples scattered for a few days, probably holed up somewhere, afraid and lost without their leader, but now they're showing up in the temple, still here in Jerusalem, teaching repentance and forgiveness and resurrection of the dead through Jesus, and the people are not only listening, they're coming out in droves. And now his *disciples* are performing signs!

Apparently, they have very short memories because it wasn't that long ago that their leader Jesus was brought right here before me and the rest of the council and was condemned to death. We've told them to stop it, to cease and desist; we've even arrested them, thrown them into prison, but still they're at it, after repeated warnings. Now what are we supposed to do? We let Peter and John go the last time because we didn't want to rile up the people. This time we lock up the lot of them and somehow, they escape right through locked doors, right by the guards, and they're back teaching in the temple again! Clearly, this is not working. Rome is breathing down our necks and if we're not careful, we could be courting a disaster.

And what answer do they give? "We must obey God rather than any human authority." What am I supposed to do with *that*? That really enrages me, and then for them to say, The God of *our* ancestors raised up Jesus, and God exalted him as Leader and Savior of Israel and they're witnesses to it? Not on my watch!

But, you know, between you and me, I've noticed something about them. I mean, we've had wild-eyed zealots before stirring people up. Gamaliel, one of our really good teachers of the

law, mentioned a couple of them at our meeting this morning. But, truthfully, these apostles of Jesus are different. I notice it in their eyes, in their facial expressions. They don't seem afraid. Now, I don't care who you are, when you get hauled up in front of us, with the possibility of flogging or imprisonment or worse staring you in the face, peace and joy are not the usual reactions. Their leader Jesus really had that look. A quiet confidence or something. And these apostles exhibit it as well, a sureness in what they're doing, almost like they believe it *is* God who has sent them out to teach. If they didn't make me so angry, I could almost call it faith.

And here's another thing about them: the way they interact with each other. With gentleness and respect. The last time they were before me, it was just Peter and John, and I could see there might be a hint of competition between them, but the regard they had for each other was pretty astounding. If I wasn't considering having them executed, I could almost call it love.

And they walk around with this tremendous sense of expectation. Like something good's going to happen or something's coming. And they smile a lot. Despite being roughed up and thrown around - and this morning we had them flogged before they were released—they don't seem to be bothered by it. In fact, today, they almost seemed happy about it! If they didn't confuse me so much, I'd say they were walking around with an awful lot of hope.

So, I don't know what we're going to do with them. This morning Gamaliel—good man—reminded us of this having happened before. And after awhile it usually sputters out. It's like your fads and celebrities—all the rage for awhile and then where are they? So this movement will probably fail, too.

The thing is, with the way these guys are, even if they're half of what Jesus was, they're not going to stop unless we kill them. And even then, with all the hundreds, now they estimate thousands, of believers who are following, more will just pop up where they left off. Somehow, we just can't put them down, and you know what the most amazing thing is? They don't fight back the way people usually do. Jesus didn't either. Something about loving your enemies. I heard on the night he was arrested, right before they brought him to me, he told them to put away their swords! I don't know what you do with that ... that nonviolent response. It's more disarming than clubs and swords.

And I've heard they keep nothing for themselves. It all goes into a common purse and then it's distributed by whoever among them has need. How in the world do you get anywhere that way?

And here's the other thing! They accept anybody. Anybody! They've got some of our tax collectors following them around and the crippled and the blind and the poor, the sick, sinners of every kind, and they tell them they're loved by God and they're forgiven and in Jesus will find eternal life. I don't know how this can possibly go anywhere.

I think I'm going to take Gamaliel's advice. If this movement is of human origin, it will probably be over in weeks—I mean, c'mon—faithful, loving, hopeful, nonviolent people who share everything and accept everybody? Where's the future in that?

But if it is of God, I shudder to think about it. It will completely turn the world upside down. Or at least it should.

Amen.