

Sunday July 31, 2022
Lesson 9: Mission Without Walls
Scripture: Acts 16: 25-34

Context:

We continue our unit of unpacking life in the Spirit as found in the work of the early church being moved by the Holy Spirit. This week we examine how the Spirit may be working when we live our faith in difficult situations. We look at a prison scene in Acts to see where spiritual disciplines drew disciples closer to God and then led to fruit in their ministry.

The setting of today's text is the city of Philippi. Paul and Silas have been in ministry here and made great strides. They have met with Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman who demonstrates Christian hospitality and have met with the church representatives there to give support and structure. During their travels, they go to a place of prayer only to be accosted by a slave girl. She is possessed by a demon or something of such and she follows them around the city shouting at them. Finally, Paul has enough and in the name of Christ, cures her.

However, the slave girl is owned by people who have used her as an entertainment artist as well as someone who tells fortunes. They are angry their source of income is now healed, and they go to the judge to file a complaint. They complain of these "Jewish men" disturbing the city and argue they are disrupting commerce. Soon the word spreads, and the entire business community alongside a crowd of buyers attack and beat Paul and Silas. After they are then flogged, they are taken back to the prison and placed in the innermost cell as to keep them from escaping or perhaps Christian sympathizers.

The men are left with nothing to do but languish there, praying and singing hymns before God. Suddenly, an earthquake comes, and the prison's foundations are shaken so the doors are opened, and everyone's shackles become loose. As good as this may be for the prisoners, particularly Paul and Silas, this is awful for the jailer. As he knows what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners to escape, he draws his sword and prepares to do the honorable thing for disgraced jailers and take his own life.¹ Yet Paul steps in and tells him no one has left instead of running for the doors.

The jailer then asks what he might do to save his life. They have a conversation and then the jailer cleans their wounds. Upon completion of cleansing them, he is baptized by Paul and Silas. He is so moved he invites them to baptize everyone in his household. To celebrate such a joyous occasion, he brings them to his home where they share a meal with one another. The whole house rejoices in becoming a part of the Christian community.

The story is one of reversals. Those who started out free – the girl's owners, the judges, the jailer – are slaves.² And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Silas, and Paul – is free.³ At Philippi true freedom is discovered and the Spirit works in the strangest ways.

¹ William Willimon, "Acts," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 140.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Application

If you have ever seen pictures or visited prison cells in ancient places, you know they were dark and gloomy, with a focus on shielding the prisoner from sunlight or community. The conditions would be declared unlivable today by first world standards and would be considered cruel punishment. A prison in Philippi is where Paul and Silas find themselves after they had healed and made someone whole. What a crime to be convicted for and sentenced to go after such a brutal flogging!

The story of Paul and Silas in Philippi occurs in a wealthy Roman colony where people are supposedly “civilized” and “cultured.” Yet this is what they face as they share their faith and attempt to help people become whole and heal. They receive beating and then imprisonment. Their response is to pray and to sing hymns as they sit in a dark cell with an unknown future ahead of them.

As I read the stories in Acts of the early church, I have come to marvel at the forbearance of our early church ancestors as they labored together for our Lord. They did not have the knowledge of what would happen, and they could not see the fruit of the seeds they planted. Instead, they gave of themselves and prayed God’s goodness would spread throughout the land. And we know from the letter to the church in Philippi, there was praise and adoration for the people there as Paul encouraged them. It was if the beatings and the imprisonment faded away as he thought about the good around him.

Our early church ancestors were giving us an example of what we might tell in our lives with our stories. How easy could it have been for Paul or Silas to slam the church in Philippi for not protecting them or criticizing the city. Instead, they later continued to spread the good news and the church there grew.

I think Christians of today, whatever age we may be, have a lot to learn from these brave souls who felt the nudge of God’s Spirit. I have come to notice in our society, even within Christian communities, we tend to complain about the church and God. We do not sing hymns or lift prayers of praise, adoration, confession, or thankfulness. Instead, we engage in what a good mentor of mine calls “self-loathing” where we blame everyone and everything around us about the state of the church and the state of the world. Of course, we never own our part. We just complain and gripe, hoping for people to hear about our victimization and the suffering and “coal shoveling” we have done for God and the church, receiving nothing in return.

While there is certainly a place for grieving and naming losses in changing times, I read this story of Paul and Silas and I feel convicted about what the Spirit might be doing in me and others when we go through difficult times in our lives. This is not to say God wills things so we might be tested or make our faith a kind of litmus test. Instead, this text invites us to engage on what will we do in trying times and how we will either cling or reassess our faith in seasons of struggle.

I will never forget in a difficult time in my life, sitting with an older wiser colleague who was also facing some difficulties of their own. We named the pain, the frustrations, and the complexities facing us. In the midst of the conversation, they shared with me a verse they found in their devotional which was giving them hope and they were repeating daily from Psalm 27:1: “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?” The pain did not necessarily go away. The complexity did not disappear. Yet I did feel a seed of hope planted in my heart and soul and I grew to take my prayer time and my scripture reading as a place to see where the Spirit was encouraging and making me whole.

Fortunately, in our story from Acts, the faithfulness of Paul and Silas led to the conversion of the jailer and their family. They planted seeds and perhaps led the way to the church at Philippi exploding with love and goodness. We can only pray, even if we find ourselves in the darkness, of how God may use our faithfulness and example to build up other members of the body of Christ and simultaneously remind us of how our Lord never abandons or forsakes us. The Spirit breathes through us, and we are refreshed in the goodness of the Lord.

What are spiritual disciplines which help you in difficult situations? Have you ever seen part of your testimony help someone else during a dark time? How does complaining or griping about past grievances break apart the body and lead to more brokenness? Who are people who help you with your faith walk in difficult seasons? When was a time you felt the Spirit at work in you even when the world around you seemed to be collapsing?

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