

“Be the Church”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-4

New Testament Lesson: Acts 16:25-34

Religious writer William Willimon tells of a Methodist bishop visiting the United States from the Africa country of Angola. Meeting with a group of American Christians, the bishop was asked if the church in Angola felt any type of support or tolerance from the country’s new, Marxist government. Marxism is totally against religion of any kind. “No,” said the bishop, “but we don’t ask (the government) to be supportive.”

He told the Americans that the government had banned church meetings, but churches continued to meet despite the ban. “What will you do when the government becomes stronger?” asked the Americans. “We shall keep meeting,” replied the bishop. “The government does what it needs to do. The church does what it needs to do. If we go to jail for being the church, we shall go to jail.”¹

At midnight, Paul and Silas were in prison for the crime of being the church. The next morning, they are free, their wounds washed and bandaged, and, according to the Book of Acts, their church has become one household bigger.

Yesterday, our church – the church in America – was on the decline, its growth arrested by a society that by-and-large sees no value in religious practices. Today, we get to decide what’s to come of that. Will we go on being the church or will we fade away into a lack of support from society, feed into the disinterest of our families and friends, cave under the skepticism of people we encounter everyday who can’t see the gift of the faith community standing before them with outstretched arms?

In deciding how to respond to this general lack of support from society in general, we look at how Paul and Silas responded. What did they do when their efforts to grow the church were arrested, literally?

The first thing we learn about Paul and Silas in prison is that they were praying and signing hymns to God at midnight. Why? Why were they up at midnight?

¹ William H. Willimon, *Preaching to Strangers* (Westminster John Knox, 1992), 23.

It could be that prison was so uncomfortable they couldn't sleep. It could be they were so deep in the bowels of the prison they had no daylight; no way to know what time it was. Either way, they're situation is hopeless, or so it seems. And yet, Paul and Silas keep the faith; they keep being the church, even when there is no signs of fellow Christians, fellow worshipers anywhere nearby, and no certainty how things would go for the church outside their prison walls. Would it flourish or flounder?

Well, for most churches in America today, that's a familiar feeling. We're in here praying and singing hymns to God, and all the while, we're not sure there are any potential worshipers outside the doors of our church. Too often we doubt. Sometimes we're certain there's no one we know who is open to church, open to what regular faith practices have to offer them, how their lives and their families could be transformed, how they could help make the world a better place? Will we flourish or flounder?

As Paul and Silas were wondering the same things, just then, the foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors were opened and their chains fell away – Freedom! And what do these two men of faith do? They continue being the church. Inside or outside, prison or freedom – in good times and bad – be the church.

Here's an example of being the church in the face of a hopeless situation. It's 1895, and an anti-Semitic German preacher named Ahlwardt arrives in New York City. He's there to launch a crusade against Jews. The city's Jewish leaders go to the police commissioner, Teddy Roosevelt, and demanded that Ahlwardt not be allowed to speak. But under the laws of society, the German bigot was entitled to freedom of speech, and in fact, he was even eligible for police protection. What was Roosevelt to do? Be the church.

I don't know if it was a flash of divine inspiration or not, but what Roosevelt did was certainly in the spirit of the Gospel. Roosevelt personally appointed a contingent of security guards for Ahlwardt: 40 policemen, all of them Jewish².

The story of Paul and Silas – and the story of Roosevelt – show us how to be the church, even in the face of those who stand against us, those who look right through us, those who have no regard for what we have to offer as people of faith in a hurting world. When the jailer fell into despair – planning to kill himself in fear of what might happen – Paul and Silas reach out to him, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”

¹ Shane Mooney, et al., "50 reasons we're proud to be Americans," *Maxim*, July 2000, 118.

Now that's how to be the church, right? I mean, if we were to reach out to those around us – those going through crises and heading in the wrong direction – and simply say, “We are here. Don't go on hurting yourself because you have no faith, no faith that things can get better,” if people in crisis or need were to hear that from us – from the church – don't you think that might wake them up, have them take a second look at what it means to be a part of a great community of faith like this one? Sure it would.

Hearing what Paul and Silas have to say amid his darkest moment, the jailer calls for light, rushes in, and falls down before Paul and Silas, saying, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Well, clearly that's just what would happen to us if we were to be more like Paul and Silas – not! We can't expect people to see the light with just one encounter. We can't expect them to come running into church on Day 1 asking, “What must I do to be saved.” We can hope for it; it's possible; it happens.

But more often than not, people come to faith over time, perhaps when their foundation has been shaken by an event they didn't see coming. Sometimes the most impactful, effective thing we can do is continue to be the church, continue to reach out saying, “We are here. Do not harm yourself,” do not let your lack of faith, your sense of hopelessness overtake you. Things can and will get better, and we are proof of that.

Each of us has our own “prison story,” those times or places when we have felt all alone, in the dark, no signs of hope. And each of us made it through, by the grace of God, through our faith in Jesus, being uplifted on the wings of the Holy Spirit. That, too, is being the church. And not only living through it, but telling about it!

When Paul and Silas saw the jailer was feeling so hopeless AND that he just might be open to hearing a good word from a faithful soul, they went to him and said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus.” Take a chance on Jesus. What do you have to lose? We might say the same thing of ourselves in reaching out to those outside the church; what do we have to lose?

Paul and Silas invited the jailer to stand with them on the firm foundation of Jesus Christ, encouraging him to take that first step, to open his heart to faith. For in doing so, they tell him, “You will be saved....” And not only you, but “you and your household.”

We have something as Christians that the world needs. Don't let that be locked away in a prison of your own making, a prison of shyness that has you uncomfortable reaching out to someone in need, a prison of busyness that has you unavailable – unaware – of the need around you, a prison of status that allows you to pass right through a neighborhood while it is actively doing harm to itself, because it has no vision, it has no hope.

We have the vision, God has given us the hope, and we have the power to share it through a word of encouragement and guidance, a helping hand, a loving expression of the heart of Jesus.

Yesterday, a ministry group from First Church worked to do just that -to be the church- at Procter Elementary School here in Independence. Each year, we join with Project Shine to spruce up the schools before children return in the fall.

Now you might not see this as extraordinarily meaningful and impactful, but what if it were not to happen? What if schools like Procter were left to fend for themselves each year? There's no telling what those children would be walking into this fall!

If you're not sharing a word of encouragement and guidance, a helping hand, the heart of Jesus with those in need, those who think church and religion has run its course, what are you waiting for? What is holding you back?

We have the opportunity everyday to be the church in witness to those who think our day has come and gone. And every once in a while, by the grace of God, we have the opportunity to free someone from the prison of hopelessness, maybe even free the whole world!

When someone you know is standing on a shaky foundation, reach out to them and says, "I am here – we are here. You are not alone." And maybe, just maybe, invite that person to pray with you. Invite him or her to a worship service, an evening of music performance at church, an afternoon of hiking with folks who know and love the gift of God's creation, or any of the other church activities we have planned, activates that will speak that word of encouragement and guidance – if we give them voice – activities that are a true helping hand in the Spirit of Christ, activities that can and will shower upon them the love of Jesus.

I don't know what prison-like confinement or limitation you might be feeling in being the church outside these walls, but that, my friends, is where the greatest need exists. Whether it knows it or not, the world needs us.

And just like God cleared the way for Paul and Silas, it is my prayer that God will clear the way for you -for me. Be ready for that, for that time when those doors are thrown open and you are called to draw near to someone in need, to be the church in a world that thinks it knows us, but sadly it does not. So we must continue to be the church. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Blessed Jesus, how often we fail to recognize you! How often we fail to receive you when you come to us as a sister or a brother.

We are more comfortable with your divinity, more ready to accept you as the victorious Savior.

Often, we are afraid to touch you or look into your eyes when you confront us as a stranger, a prisoner, an underserved child, or a victim of oppression and poverty.

And yet, there you are in the flesh, waiting to receive us, waiting to show us your life and inviting us to share it.

Dear Jesus, open our hearts, our arms and our eyes so that we might recognize and receive you, especially among the children of immigrant families displaced by warfare and hatred.

Our prayers are also with those we are reminded of every week as we gather in faith, those being treated for disease, those who are under-employed, those who are grieving the loss of a loved one or caring for family members in their twilight years.

We pray, also for ourselves, Lord. Help us to be your hand and feet, your heart and voice in a world in need, a world that largely does not recognize you or value you.

We pray this, knowing the power of your living Word in and among us, and using the words that you taught to us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**