

We are Witnesses: To Our Neighbors

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Acts 16:16-34

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The chances are probably pretty good

- that the local jailer didn't know Paul
 - prior to his unfortunate incarceration.
- Paul hadn't been in the city all that long.
 - Paul spoke with a business woman, named Lydia and some of other women.
 - He was preaching around town,
 - but we have no indication that he and the jailer had ever met.
 - When the earthquake occurred,
 - the jailer
 - had no reason to think
 - that Paul, Silas and the other prisoners
 - wouldn't have tried to escape.

The earthquake was strong enough to thrown open the doors

- and break the chains.
 - The jailer knew, just knew, in that moment
 - that the prisoners had escaped.
 - He prepared himself to pay the ultimate price
 - for his failure.
- The jailer drew his sword

- and that's when he heard Paul's voice - -

“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” (*Acts 16:28, NRSV*)

I imagine the jailer was stunned to hear that anyone was still inside.

- These were prisoners after all - -

- Why wouldn't they take the opportunity to escape?

- Why wouldn't they run from the jail given the chance?

- Surely, this couldn't be true, - -

“The jailer called for lights, and rushing in,

- he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.” (*Acts 16:29, NRSV*)

- It was true.

- They really were still inside. - - -

- Now, we don't know if the jailer

- had heard Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns.

- We don't know if the jailer had checked in earlier and

- noticed that all the prisoners were listening

- to these two men of faith.

- We don't even know for sure if

- the jailer knew about the spirit that Paul had driven from the slave girl

- or that Paul and Silas were in the city teaching about Jesus.

- What we do know,

- is that in that moment, - -

- the jailer is so moved by the witness of Paul and Silas' actions,

- that he asks

- “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (*Acts 16:30, NRSV*)

- The witness of this emerging faith community in a prison

- is so powerful,

- that this man,

- turns to these relative strangers for guidance about salvation.

- Think about that for a moment - -

- In the midst of a crisis,

- in the midst of a difficult time, - -

- the faith of Paul and Silas,

- the witness of these prisoners who had heard them

- offer prayers and sing hymns,

- the power of God’s love at work in people’s lives -

- shines through. - - -

- I don’t know about you,

- but that sounds pretty familiar to me.

- In the midst of crisis,

- in the midst of a difficult time,

- God’s people come together

- and let God’s light shine in the darkness.

- Oh, the jailer had to bring a light with him into the prison,

- to verify that Paul and the prisoners were still there,

- but make no mistake about it, -

- it was Paul, Silas and the prisoners who truly let the light shine that day.

- It was their faithfulness, - -
 - it was the light of God's love
 - shining through them
 - that saved the jailers life,
 - both literally and spiritually.
- It is amazing what the witness of a faithful community can do.
 - I mean think about how powerful it is
 - to join in singing a hymn with a large group of people.
 - If you haven't experienced this gift of faithful song before,
 - come to the big Synod Assembly worship service
 - in Roanoke sometime.
 - Listen to 800 faithful voices join in song.
 - It is a powerful witness to God's love
 - for anyone who hears or sings the music.
 - Or think about what it meant to all of the people in our community
 - to get card after card,
 - email after email
 - letting us know that people were praying for us.
 - Or think about what it means to you
 - when a couple of people call to check on you
 - when you are going through a difficult time.
- The witness of a community of believers
 - can have a powerful impact on the lives of their neighbors.

- We see this in the story of Paul and Silas and
 - we know it is true from our own experiences.
 - That's why, - when I heard this story again this week
 - I found myself more convinced than ever
 - that we are called as people of God
 - to be witnesses to our neighbors, -
 - both corporately, - - - as a congregation
 - and personally, - - - as individuals.
- It took Paul, Silas and all the prisoners
 - in ministry together
 - to reach out to the jailer in a meaningful way.
- As a congregation,
 - we join together in ministry to offer an overall witness to the community
 - through the ways we use our gifts and resources.
- So for example,
 - because of the Justice and Mercy Fund,
 - because of the Thanksgiving Meal,
 - because of our willingness to host groups in the community,
 - because of the way we reach out to help local schools,
 - we are becoming known as a church that offers help
 - to people in need.
- The compassion, caring and generosity
 - that we show to the world

- reflects the compassion, caring and generosity
 - that God shows us
 - and it helps others to see the love, mercy and forgiveness
 - of God.
- All of these ministries and
 - countless others which have happened and will happen, -
 - let the light of God's love shine in our community
 - and allow our neighbors to experience our faith in action.
- Our witness to our neighbors, however,
 - isn't just something that we do as a congregation,
 - but it is also something we do as individuals.
 - If Paul and Silas
 - hadn't reached out to their neighbors in jail, -
 - the jailer and his family wouldn't have discovered Jesus.
- Likewise, - -
 - you have the opportunity
 - to use your gifts
 - to reach out to your neighbors and help them discover God's love.
 - Now - - maybe you are like Paul and Silas,
 - and prayer and singing are among your gifts.
 - Perhaps you volunteer to pray with, or for, a friend
 - who is in need.
 - Perhaps, - you sing your favorite hymn

- while you are working in the garden
 - and through those words and notes
 - someone's ears are opened
 - to hear about God's love.
- Perhaps, - you are more like Francis of Assisi,
 - who said something like:
 - >Go and preach the Gospel,
 - use words if necessary.'
 - and so you have the opportunity
 - to reach out to someone through your actions or way of life.
 - You might fly a decorative flag on your house
 - that reflects the season of the church year we are in.
 - or You might volunteer your time to help with a mission project
 - you are excited about.
 - or You might use words and a tone that reflect your faith
 - when you speak to the people you encounter in your life.
- Perhaps
 - you are gifted at building relationships.
 - You might offer a listening ear in a moment of pain,
 - or a guiding phrase to a person in trouble,
 - or a word of encouragement to a person
 - doubting God's presence.
- You never know

- how your witness is going to effect one of your neighbors.
 - Your kindness and faithfulness might open the door
 - to a lifelong relationship with God.
 - Your participation in a ministry of St. Michael
 - might help someone and their family discover
 - that God loves them more than words can express.
- Like Paul, Silas and those prisoners before us,
 - We are witnesses to our neighbors,
 - for with God's help
 - we can be a beacon of God's light, - -
 - shining in the darkness
 - helping others to know both that
 - no matter how dark things seem
 - God is always here
 - and that thanks to the promise of Christ's victory over death,
 - there is eternal hope for you, for me,
 - for our neighbors
 - and for all of God's people.