

We Do Need Each Other 2022  
 Acts 16:25-34 John 17:20-26

#### Acts 16:25-34 (New Revised Standard Version)

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

#### John 17:20-26 (New Revised Standard Version)

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

When I was just getting started, my 2<sup>nd</sup> year or so out of seminary,  
 some of the older and wiser pastors of the Presbytery  
 invited me to meet with their monthly pastors group.

Their purpose was to discuss, to plot and plan strategy,  
 to ensure that decisions in our Presbytery went their way  
 on some difficult, volatile and controversial issues  
 that had been voted on by the previous General Assembly.

The group included some pretty well-known and influential pastors,  
 and being invited to hang out with **Presbyterian superstars**  
 was exciting and pretty heady stuff for a new, young pastor.

It was a four-hour drive to Fayetteville for those meetings,  
 so essentially, I lost a day of doing ministry each time we met,  
 but what a wonderful opportunity to rub shoulders and  
 be in the thick of battle with these impressive leaders.

But when the same issues came back up again from the GA the next year,

I wondered and I questioned whether I had really been faithful,  
**and did we actually accomplish anything for the Kingdom of God?**

I remember getting caught up with my own sense of eager fervency,  
trying to influence and win at any cost... **... but to what end?**

Looking back, the Presbyterian Church was being torn apart  
by groups trying to resolve issues of faith and culture  
using the same methods & political tactics of this world ...  
**...as if the experience of God's grace & love made no difference at all.**

With the focus and emphasis placed more on trying to score a win  
than on the effectiveness of our Christian witness and unity,  
**I believe we had somehow gotten off track from our true mission.**

In 1729, a group of students at Oxford University formed a club  
that was intended to help each member grow in discipleship.  
They fasted and each one made themselves accountable to the group.  
They met for devotions and Bible study together every night,  
because they wanted their lives to be more pleasing to the Lord,  
**by doing all the right and righteous things they could.**

They expected that **by methodically doing all the right things,**  
they would build-up their faith through their accountability,  
the same way that an athlete builds muscle and strengthens  
**with lots of good coaching, effort and self-discipline.**

While one of them was on his way to be a missionary to colonial Georgia  
the ship he was on got caught in a fierce and terrible storm at sea.  
That young missionary fell into a terrified panic that he might die.

In contrast, a group of Moravian families who were also on board  
gathered in prayer and they were calmly singing psalms together,  
**despite the violent storm raging on all around them.**

Young John Wesley was stunned and shocked by their lack of fear  
and by their faith that was so calm and sure even in facing death.

Despite his methods of striving for righteousness before God,  
during that storm of his terrible panic, fear and danger,  
he realized that **their faith** had something he lacked...  
**... a simple trust, hope and confidence in God.**

He knew a great deal about being religious and righteous living,  
but not so much about the gentle peace and assurance  
of having a trusting and loving relationship with Jesus.  
**Somehow his group had gotten off track from their true mission.**

The point is  
that **whatever the Lord is up to**, God's perfect will and purpose,  
is far more important than our good plans, hard work and effort,  
**and that God can transform even our disasters into blessing.**

**The story we read in Acts 16 is an example of how this all works.**

The situation is that Paul and Silas are Christian missionaries,  
who arrive at Philippi proclaiming the Good News about Jesus.  
**They are there to preach the Gospel and to start a church.**

They came to Philippi with a plan for accomplishing their mission,  
but then they are attacked, beaten and imprisoned by the locals.

That part wasn't what Silas & Paul had in mind or planned for the day.  
They were there to serve the Lord, to do ministry in Philippi,  
but now their purpose & agenda were not working out as planned.  
Instead, they were bruised and bleeding, locked away in jail.

Let's pause for a moment, and consider how would you or I react,  
if we had been locked up in that prison cell with Paul and Silas.  
**How do you react and respond when life doesn't go your way?,  
or when something or someone interferes with your plans?**

**Do you ever doubt that God has things under control and is at work  
or that God can create blessings from even our worst disasters?**

Notice how Paul & Silas respond to their harsh & unjust imprisonment.  
Notice, their focus is not about complaining or trying to escape,  
or how to get their missionary plans back on track. vs. 25-26

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners  
were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison  
were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

Their plan & their goal was evangelism, to build a church in Philippi,  
and God had arranged **for their work to begin from a prison cell.**

By faith, Paul and Silas saw their suffering and their imprisonment  
as something that might be within God's will, plan and purpose,  
**and as an unexpected opportunity that God had arranged ...**

... and so, they trusted in the Lord as through their music and worship  
they brought the light of hope into that dark & terrible place  
so much so, that even the other prisoners chose to remain...  
**... and so, it would seem that the church at Philippi had been started.**

**They allowed God to use their situation, disappointment & struggle  
to accomplish his purpose through the troubles they had endured.  
That is an incredible perspective on our human struggle & problems.**

Can you imagine seeing **all** of our troubles, struggles and problems,  
and **all** of our frustrations, our losses, disappointments and hurts,  
**as possibly useful to God, as opportunity to serve & live by faith?**

What if we **so completely trusted** the Lord's power, promises & purpose  
that we could sing praise and gratitude to the Lord,  
even as our best hopes & plans are plummeting down in flames...  
**because we are so certain, so confident and thankful  
that God is indeed working out his will and purpose?**

It seems God did use such an attitude to accomplish great things.

Consider the impact Paul & Silas had in that awful prison. vs. 27-30

When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

What an incredible turn of heart for that hardened jailer to ask,

**What must I do to be saved, and how can I get what you've got?**

q, What must I do? a, **Receive God's grace through Jesus Christ.**

As a sign of God's gracious power to transform and unite human hearts,

**the way that the jailer responded is very significant, vs. 33-34**

At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

The jailer's sign of true transformation was his compassion

his caring for their needs & sharing a meal of grace & fellowship,

by which he **opened himself up to the flow of God's grace,**

and became a part of the body of Christ in Christian unity.

Authentic Christian faith means a unity of the sort

that wags its tail more than it growls and barks,

or as a friend once pointed out,

most of shouting and noise comes from the shallow end of the pool.

One time when our Presbytery was voting on some very divisive issues,

I happened to be sitting next to a very close and dear friend,

who almost always came down on the opposite side

of every vote that came before the Presbytery.

Although we disagreed fervently on almost every issue that day,

**I knew that his heart was in Christ and seeking to be faithful,**

and the faith we shared, that friendship and trust

mattered far more than our theological differences.

Years later, I really don't remember how all the voting came out,

but I do remember how very much I enjoyed my friend,

and the way we discussed the business of Presbytery.

In fact, it was through our conversation and differing opinions,

that we were both better able to clarify our own understandings,

as we were given a glimpse into the other's perspective.

We chose that day, **to discuss rather than argue and debate,**

as we sought to understand more than convince each other,

**and I believe that day we were on track with our mission.**

**I believe God leaves lots of questions unanswered intentionally,**

**and uses mystery, ambiguity, paradox and vague puzzles**

**that help us grow by digging deeper to think more clearly.**

Unresolved diversity and ambiguity are gifts to the Church  
as we learn to connect in unity **through the love of Christ**,  
with those who see & perceive things differently than we do...  
... which is also **is the message and point of John 17**,  
**where Jesus fervently prayed for the unity of the Church.**

It was just hours before the events of the Passion would begin,  
and so Jesus was emphasizing the most important lessons  
that the disciples needed to understand and remember.

**His prayer is for there to be unity among the whole family of faith,**  
**as a clear demonstration before all the world**  
**of the truth of the Gospel, God's reconciling love for all...**

**... in sharp contrast to the destructive ways that exclude**  
**that our world and our culture deal with differences.** vs. 21~23

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me... **so that they may be one**, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they **may become completely one**, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

**Just as the Father and the Son are distinct yet One in relationship**  
**so too, we are each distinct and unique, yet unified by grace.**

The same love that unifies Father and Son and Spirit as One God  
should also unify all of us as the Church, the body of Christ,  
without crushing our individual uniqueness and diversity...  
**... and that is something that the world can notice,**  
**and recognize as a sign of God's gracious love.**

**But how can the world take seriously or believe the Good News,**  
**if those who claim** their lives were changed by it  
**if those who claim** to believe God's word as truth,  
are fighting bitter battles among themselves,  
or are less than welcoming to all of God's people?

If our unity in Christ and God's grace are not the deciding factor  
when it comes to the really big issues and concerns of life,  
or dealing with the diversity that makes us each unique...  
**... then why would the world or our culture**  
**take seriously the Gospel message we proclaim?**

We are not saved by our theology, good works or even sound doctrine,  
but by the grace of God through our union in Jesus Christ,  
according to God's own desire and design toward reconciliation.

**God's grace received by faith creates a real possibility for unity,**  
as we focus on the love of God that binds us all together  
into a faithful community that lives in such a way...  
**... that the world may come to believe.**

For when we open ourselves to live out God's gracious love,  
then God's love and mercy can flow through us to others,  
a love for others that has **no fences, barriers or boundaries**,  
for the authenticity of God's presence and love active in our lives  
is best reflected by our own love and welcome toward other people.

In my Bible, we are never commanded to defeat or destroy our enemies,  
but rather, Jesus commanded us, to love our enemies ...  
... which sometimes includes our sisters & brothers in Christ.

Our call is to commit wholeheartedly to the Lordship of Jesus Christ,  
and let the love and grace of God guide us to live and to love,  
to serve in faith together as the hope-filled people of God...

... just as we read in 1 Peter 4:8~9 (*The Message*)

Most of all, love each other as if your life depended on it. Love makes up for practically anything... Be generous with the different things God gave you, passing them around **so all get in on it.**