

Sermon: May 29, 2022 – Acts 16: 16-34
Rundle Memorial United Church, Banff AB – Rev Greg Wooley

“The true measure of your character is what you do when nobody’s watching.” First attributed to Charles Caleb Colton nearly 200 years ago, there have been versions of this quote repeated far and wide since then, most notably by legendary UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden, who wanted his players to understand that integrity matters off the court and on the court. As an aside, I think of a quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln, “Don’t believe everything you read on the internet just because there’s a picture with a quote next to it” so I wouldn’t want to stake my reputation on the authorship of that opening quote, but the point remains: integrity does matter. Those things we do simply because it’s the right thing to do – not because it’s going to boost someone else’s opinion of us, not because it will gain us anything – are some of the clearest demonstrations of our character.

The book of Acts is full of stories that reveal the character of the first followers of Jesus. Yes, we need to understand that these stories of heroism are stylized accounts, designed to draw people to Christ who may be searching for a fresh path in life, and to inspire those already on the path. Yet there are things in today’s reading from Acts that speak to the heart, with truths that we desperately need to hear in a world so dominated by spin, and image, and mistrust, and manipulation of the truth.

From start to finish, this Bible passage talks about character and integrity. When they first arrived in Philippi, Paul and Silas were plagued by a young enslaved woman trailing around with them, repeatedly shouting out divinations about them. While their act of casting that spirit out of her seems to have been spurred more by annoyance than by love, in doing so her life was handed back to her. She was no longer the money-making sideshow of her owner, her personhood was restored. Problem was, that also meant that her owner/pimp would no longer make money off her, and that got Paul and Silas thrown into jail. With this, we are reminded of Christianity at its best: opposing the idea that human lives are nothing more than money-making machinery, with the full knowledge that there will be consequences. People liked having their fortunes told, there was entertainment value to this young woman’s life as it was, but her personhood mattered more.

Once they were in jail, we arrive at what I think is the pivotal event of the chapter. Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, and in the middle of the night, amidst their prayers and songs of praise, an earthquake violently shook the jail, such that the prison doors burst open. Given the severity of the charges against them, one would imagine that the next panel in this comic strip would be Paul and Silas stepping out of the jail cell and high-tailing it out of there.

But that’s not what happened. Paul and Silas stayed put. And the reason they stayed put, was that somebody else would have paid the price for the escape. No matter how much they wanted to get out of there, they understood the consequences of their actions for someone else. Their freedom would have been paid for, by the life of the jailer and in the story we are told that he was on the verge of falling on his sword, out of honour or panic or because he knew what his bosses would do to him for this dereliction

of duty. But Paul and Silas would have none of this. Rather than leaving the cell for the freedom they so dearly wished, they shouted out “we are all still here.”

Let’s sit with that scene for a bit and let every bit of it sink in. We have Paul and Silas, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. We have a jailer, an employee of the state, whose job is to make sure that prisoners don’t escape, whether they are innocent or guilty, whether they were there on civil or criminal or political grounds. And even with the mission entrusted to them, a mission of grace, love and freedom (which would have been fully sufficient reason for getting out of jail while they had a chance to do so) the life of the jailer was worth more.

How often do we hear stories like that? If indeed “the true measure of one’s character is what one does when nobody’s watching” these kinds of selfless actions may well happen all the time, but *because* nobody is watching or advertising the wonderful things that were done off-camera so that somebody else can live, these acts of profound character and deep integrity do not get heard, pushed aside so we can read headlines of aggression, corruption and self-service. The optimist in me hopes this is so, that every day big and small decisions get made away from the spotlight and don’t make the news cycle because, well, conflict and division sell. The pessimist in me, though, wonders if present-day global divisiveness and questions of what is factual have convinced large swaths of the population that the only thing that matters is me and the protection of my privilege, regardless of how that would impact *someone* else or *everyone* else. But whether these kinds of selfless, unreported acts of integrity are rare or widespread, they are nothing short of fruits of the spirit: evidence of the selfless love at the heart of the divine, unleashed and at work in the world.

Stopping for a moment before making decisions big or small to ask that question, “who will pay the price for this decision?” could be a game-changer, and could help us to see our decision-making times as holy moments. Instinct would tell Paul and Silas, “run” but the Holy Spirit said to them, “imagine the cost, and who’s going to pay that cost.” Imagine what a difference it would make to the health of the planet, if the financial benefits of land development were truly and transparently tempered by a concern for the price that gets paid by the soil, the water, the air, and the creatures who inhabited this land long before any humans arrived here. And bring to mind those times, in your family or your neighbourhood or in your broad experience of the world, when “who might be harmed by this?” thinking has made a change for the better. Remember this potential, of taking the broad view, as you imagine a more hopeful future.

At the Festival of Homiletics, which I attended online a week ago, Lutheran Pastor and Iconoclast Nadia Bolz-Weber preached on this passage from Acts 16 and she took it a direction that I had not envisioned. Landing on the part of the passage where the jailer has drawn his sword, to end his own life because prisoners have escaped, and he is saved from carrying through by the intervention of Paul and Silas and their declaration that they had not, in reality, run off – Nadia talked about suicide intervention, and the deep, confusing, lasting pain caused by suicide in many families and communities and Churches. And no, we’re not talking about medically assisted deaths, which are a completely other thing, we’re talking about breaking into a broken thought pattern that proposes the end of a generally healthy life by one’s own hand, as the only solution... and the fact that Paul and Silas were able to successfully intervene, where many of us

have seen our best efforts come to naught. Nadia, quite correctly, urged Churches to become safe places to talk about the difficult places in our lives, the lingering traumas of our lives, even suicidal thoughts and aftershocks. Our willingness to be open about mental health and illnesses of the brain could be the moment where Churches repeat to our surrounding communities the words of Paul and Silas: “we are all still here.” We’re still here, still willing to talk about hard stuff, still desiring to be a safe place no matter what your circumstances may be.

And in case we start thinking, “hey, the heroes in this story are the Christians,” have a look at what the jailer does in response. He doesn’t just secure Paul and Silas in their cell, pocket the jail keys and have a cold one while saying, “boy, that was a close call.” He answers their selfless actions toward him, by taking a risk of his own. This same person who earlier locked them in stocks tends to their wound, brings them to his home, feeds them, and says that he wants the same Spirit that led them to save his life, to be a permanent influence on him and his beloved ones. The sacrifice of Paul and Silas led to the saving power of grace being invited into the lives of many. If that sounds like an echo of what Jesus did in the last week of his life, you’re hearing it correctly.

As the story continues, Paul and Silas get cleared of their charges in Philippi but ultimately they are still martyred, so that’s not the big payoff here. The message, in all these interconnected scenes, is of Christ’s own character – or integrity, or selflessness, or however you want to label it – creating space for the Holy Spirit to spread its lifegiving love. Love of neighbour, identified by Jesus as one of the two core principles of life, takes expression when we ask ourselves and our society, “who is going to pay the price for the decision that is about to be made?” and that question, applied in ways both big and small, has the power to change everything. Whether it’s private and doesn’t get seen at all, or evident to those who know you well and rely on your depth of character, or shown to the world on great big public stages, my prayer is for this priority for the greater common good to find its way into everything we do. Me, you, us, all of us, taking seriously the consequences of me-first thinking, and the possibilities opened when we believe Christ’s assertion, that the big picture matters more. May this be so; Amen.

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