

“We Are Who We Say We Are”
Acts 16:25-34 – May 8, 2016

INTRO: Paul and Silas are in Philippi and are on their way to the gathering place of the followers of Christ. They run into a young woman who had the ability to tell fortunes. Now Paul and Silas might just have left well enough alone, but they soon learned this young woman was a slave—she was owned by people who hired her out to read palms and provide entertainment. She made a lot of money for those who owned her, and was clearly being exploited by them. So Paul and Silas get involved and healed this woman. She was no longer able to foretell the future, and no longer able to bring in money for her owners who were plainly ticked off about what Paul and Silas have done, and get them thrown into prison. This is the story of what happens next.

A couple months ago, there was some confusion about the identity of Hank, the Brewers’ ballpark pup. There was debate over whether this was the real Hank, depending upon which photo people were looking at. Some said his coat looked darker than before. Or that his gray-tinged ears are lighter. Or that his combed out coat makes him look like a larger dog. There were even rumors floating around that the real Hank had died and been replaced by an imposter. The good news is that those were just rumors. This scrappy pup the Brewers saved from homelessness two years ago, is the same dog that came back from spring training in Arizona to fame and a good home. The microchip which was implanted in Hank, proves that this is the real dog. (*Journal Sentinel*, 3/5/16)

It’s no imposter wearing the shirt! He is who they say he is.

Sometimes we wear a shirt and our actions may or may not be consistent with the words on our chest—we may not be who we say we are. A search for what Christians might choose for their T-shirts came up with: “Jesus is My Personal Trainer,” “Jesus has my back, Who has yours?,” “JC Is With Me,” “Know Jesus, Know Peace,” “Property of Jesus,” and “All you need is a little bit of Jesus and a whole lot of coffee.” Mark Whited, serving as campus minister at the University of Evansville once said: “It’s easier to put on a T-shirt or put a bumper sticker on your car than to live the way Jesus was calling us to live.” So the shirt, doesn’t necessarily a Christian make.

Paul and Silas were in prison, because they made some intentional choices about how to live as followers of Christ. They were locked up because they’re accused of violating Roman customs and law. It was illegal for Jews to proselytize Roman citizens—to convert them to their faith. They’d been converting people left and right, and they got into that mess healing the slave girl, who probably now experienced a new kind of life for herself but it meant her owners no longer had their ready source of income. In the middle of the night, an earthquake rocks the place. The jailor has been ordered by his superiors to make sure he keeps an eye on these prisoners, and the earth shakes the prison doors off their hinges. The jailor is afraid that Paul and Silas will escape. He knew that if these guys get away, he would either be imprisoned or tortured to death.

“But this is an escape story without an escape. Paul and Silas don’t leave. Being God’s servants does not mean escape from the dangerous places, but means the opportunity to be the voice and the hands of Christ (right) there. And so just as Paul and Silas shared the gospel in song with suicide that Roman honor expected with a failure of duty, and from a life lived without faith in Christ.” (Brian Peterson)

Paul and Silas don’t go anywhere, I would propose because of their concern for that jailor. Their own self-interests weren’t the big motivator here. They probably knew the consequences of their leaving, and by their actions they show the jailor that Christ’s love has freed them to live differently. And the jailor decides to choose that same way of life for himself and his household follows suit. “Paul took the jailor’s words to mean much more than, ‘how he could save his skin?’ and invited the jailor to belief—which for Paul was always more than intellectual assent. It entailed a surrender of the whole of our selves to the love of God.” (Jim Rice)

Paul and Silas were who they said they were—followers of Christ. Their actions were consistent with their beliefs. Their quick decision to stay put, literally saved the jailor’s life. “The gospel life, (the life centered in Christ), isn’t something we learn ABOUT and then put together with instructions from the manufacturer, it’s something we BECOME as God works in us and we accustom ourselves to a life of belief and obedience and prayer.” (Eugene Peterson)

I was intrigued by a story this past week about 8 year-old Malena’s first Communion.

She and her family are a part of St. Charles RC parish in Hartland, where a whole crowd of second graders is receiving Communion there over three spring weekends, except for Malena. You see, her grandmother Catherine is a resident at St. Anne's Salvatorian Campus. Her grandmother has advanced Alzheimer's and attends Mass in a wheelchair. Malena has no memory of her grandmother ever saying her name or speaking at all, and in fact the nursing home setting at St. Anne's is the only residence Malena has ever known for her grandmother. So, when it came time for her first Communion, Malena wanted her grandmother to be a part of that, and also to be with her extended family of residents and staff she has come to love at the nursing home. (*Journal Sentinel*, 5/4/16)

This eight year old, somehow has figured out what it is to live in a way that honors other people around her. Yes, her parents were obviously a part of including in Malena's life, the traditions of the church, but something of what she may have learned or encountered, is already showing in her young life.

If we say we are followers of Christ, do our lives show it? Do we ever do or say anything different because we are Christians? Is there anything distinctive about the way we live compared to the person who lives next door who has no connection to a faith community whatsoever?

It is reported that a little boy once told a friend, "I want to be a Christian like my father." "How's that?" his friend asked. "Why no one can tell whether he is a Christian or not." People may not know if our lives don't show a consistency with the tenants of Christ.

And perhaps we should more regularly evaluate our public personas—what people see when they look at us. About a month ago, we had an election in Wisconsin. I crossed the street behind the church to the fire station to vote, and on the way back, was questioned by a reporter. I told her that no, I didn't have to wait long to vote, and that the poll workers were impressed because I was the 400th person to vote and it was only 1pm. And no, you get no prize for being number 400. I wasn't aware the photographer took a picture of me though, heading down the fire station hallway, to go in and vote. When the photo came out in the paper, I still didn't know I was the person in the picture. It took one of you, to point it out! And I realized I really don't know what I look like from the back. Here was a person with a pretty nondescript blue coat and jeans, but those certainly were my shoes—I checked. How many times do we think about what we look like, from a variety of perspectives, a variety of ways people see us?

Do we give thought to whether our actions are consistent with followers of Christ? In a world where many people are regularly motivated by their own self-interests, do we show a consistent concern for the other? Could we imagine looking at a situation like Paul and Silas viewed it and being concerned about that jailer?

In a world where people say we just need to keep others out of our country, do we remember that Jesus was once a refugee in Egypt—his parents taking him there to keep him safe? "From Paul's example (in prison), we are to see that we cannot really be free or make full use of freedom if we know our neighbors and our international brothers and sisters around the world are in fear of losing their lives and thus not free." (Angela Ying)

"People should be able to look at the way we live and begin to understand what the gospel is about. Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares about." (Jim Wallis)

The story is told that in 1939, as the Nazis were moving into the Netherlands, Henry Kramer, a Dutch theologian, was asked by a group of Christian lay people, "Our Jewish neighbors are disappearing from their homes. What must we do?" Kramer answered, "I cannot tell you what to do. I can tell you who you are. If you know who you are, you will know what to do." These persons became a part of the Dutch Resistance Movement—a sort of underground movement that saved the lives of over three hundred thousand people. If we remember who is our God, and that we are God's people, this will determine and define our conduct. (John Stroman)

A number of years ago in San Diego, a woodpile outside Louisa Lopez' house spontaneously caught fire. Louisa wasn't home, but fortunately at that moment, Bailey Couturier was riding by on his bicycle. Bailey realized the possibility that this fire could burn down the house, and maybe he empathized that someone might lose their home. Bailey flagged down a letter carrier who had a cellphone and called 911. Firefighters arrived in time and there was only minimal damage. Louisa still had a house to come home to. And as amazing as it may seem, Bailey has a lot more years to be aware of his world and respond to what he sees going on—because he was only four years old when he responded to that fire.

As Christians, we believe in loving our neighbor as ourselves. And we show our faith by what we do. (James 2:18) It's one thing to profess to be a Christian, and even to wear the shirt. But it's another thing entirely, to live out our faith publically in a sometimes difficult and complicated world.

In our homes, our neighborhoods, our schools, our streets, may we claim the name Christian, and may it show in our actions. And as much as possible, let us be who we say we are. For, as my recent fortune cookie reminded me: "Our deeds speak so much louder than somebody else's words."

--Sue Burwell