

Open Hearts: The Cost to Caring

Acts 16:16-34

May 16, 2010

The author of Luke ends his Gospel – his account of Jesus’ presence here on earth as a physical being – with a story about Jesus leaving earth. And in this story the author reports Jesus reassuring those with him that the third aspect of the Triune God that God, the Creator, has promised – the Holy Spirit – would soon be present with them.

Now, next is Pentecost Sunday (wear red) and we will talk more about the coming of the Holy Spirit then. The events Luke reports on in his second volume – the Acts of the Apostles, out of which today’s text was read – actually happened after the Holy Spirit’s presence was recognized. In case you didn’t hear the subliminal message I threw in a minute ago, red is the color of Pentecost and everyone is asked to wear as much red as possible.

Now, the two stories in this morning’s text are really two quite interesting ones. The stories of the demented slave-girl and the jailer are related to one another because Paul and Silas’ interaction with the demented slave-girl is what got them tossed into the slammer.

What happened was this: after spending some time with well-off Lydia’s family (the story we talked about last Sunday), Paul and Silas and apparently Luke, since the account is written in the first person, started for “the place of prayer.” While on their way, they encountered this slave-girl who was apparently quite disturbed in the mind.

Now, if Lydia was from the upper crust of society, this girl was from the dregs of it. There’s no doubt in my mind that the author of Luke was trying to say something significant about Paul and Silas’ ministry when he reported on their encounter with these two vastly different women in back-to-back stories.

Shortly after sharing with the rich and the famous and experiencing success as a result of spending time with Lydia’s family – the conversion of a whole family being the result – these early church leaders found themselves dealing with the poor and unknown. From the very beginning the church was to be a welcoming community – an accepting community – a melting pot – a fellowship where it didn’t matter who your parents were, how much anyone in your family made, what line of work you did, what color your skin was. Converts to the Christian faith came from all social and economic groups. The church was an open community – an accepting community – an inclusive community. Oh, may we have ears to hear in our day.

Now, this demented girl was being used by some men – some men had turned the misfortune of the young lady into a way for them to make money off of her. You see, in that day the mentally ill were regarded with this weird sort of respect. It was believed that since the gods took away their wits, the minds of the gods were what occupied the minds of the mentally ill. In other words, what this girl was going around saying was regarded as significant and some guys were profiting from the words that spilled forth from her lips.

When Paul cured the young lady of her madness therefore, these men weren’t particularly happy about the slave-girl’s improved mental health because it cost them the money they were making off of her. There was no jumping for joy at the news of this mentally disturbed young lady being healed of her mental illness. The result of Paul’s paying attention to the needs of this slave girl was a financial disaster for her business managers.<sup>1</sup>

There are two related learnings that pop out at me when I read this story and they are:

- 1) the cost of caring for others that is part of our DNA as Christians is that we have to open our hearts to everyone – including some we may really rather not associate with; and,
- 2) because we are called upon to open our hearts to everyone, there is sometimes a cost involved in caring.

The owners of the young lady knew that the ministry Paul and Silas were about was a threat to their business and thus performed what appears to be a citizens' arrest by seizing the two of them and hauling them off to the authorities. They fueled the anti-semitism and patriotism of the area by charging them with being Jews. It worked, for Paul and Silas were stripped, whipped, and locked up in prison. For caring enough about a person being misused to stop her from speaking on their behalf – opening their hearts to a mentally disturbed young lady who was falsely proclaiming their ministry – cost Paul and Silas their own physical freedom.

Biblical scholar, William Barclay, reflecting on this text back in the 1950's while teaching at Trinity College in Glasgow wrote: "Whenever Christianity attacks vested interest trouble follows. It is characteristic of (human beings) that if their pockets are touched and their profits are threatened they are up in arms. It is every (one's) duty to ask, 'Is the money I am earning worth the price? Do I earn it by serving or by exploiting others?'"<sup>2</sup>

So, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison for getting involved on behalf of the mentally ill. That's sometimes the result of doing battle with the rich and powerful. While they were in the prison, they held a midnight revival service complete with praying and singing and preaching – all the while in chains. And lo and behold, an earthquake hit and all the restraints became dislodged from the walls and the doors to the prison burst open.

Well, the jailer was apparently a fairly sound sleeper because the earthquake didn't wake him. But, when he did wake up he was scared to death when he saw the wide-open prison doors. The reason he was so scared was because the penalty spelled out in Roman law for prisoners escaping was that the jailer had to endure "...the penalty the prisoner would have suffered."<sup>3</sup> And so he took out his sword with the intention of taking his own life.

But, Paul shouted to him to stop and assured him that all of them were still there. The jailer was so shocked by the fact that they hadn't bolted that he sought from Paul and Silas and the others what it was that made them the kind of people they were. And as a result of what the group shared with the jailer in the middle of that night in the jailhouse, he became a believer – a follower – as well. As a result of his conversion – as a result of the group's caring for him – opening their hearts up to him – he opened his heart to others and started to comfort those who were wounded. Out of Paul and Silas' being comforted by the Holy Spirit as they worshipped in the midst of their unjust imprisonment, they comforted a jailer. And, out of the jailer's being comforted by the prisoners he began to comfort others. Comforters are often those who have themselves been comforted. Being comforted often results in our being comforting.

Having open hearts – opening our hearts to others, particularly those who might be different, hard to get along with, not accepted in proper society – will probably cost us something. It costs to care – to live life with our hearts on our sleeves – to have open hearts, open doors and open minds.

When we open our hearts to abused children it will cost us some time to go shopping for some books or stuffed animals and it will cost us some money. When we open our hearts to recovering alcoholics and those dealing with mental illness issues in their families and people learning how to be better parents – when we open our hearts by allowing our building to be used by others it will cost us to keep the building maintained and clean

and we might be inconvenienced once in awhile as we have to be creative about how we will share the use of our space with our own ministry needs.

When we open our hearts to the homeless by collecting canned goods and making sandwiches it will cost us some time and money – when we open our hearts to the people of Cherokee, North Carolina and Piedras Negras, Mexico it will cost us some time and money and sweat and emotion. When we open our hearts to children in need of mittens it will cost us – when we open our hearts to the people served by a food tent at the State Fair it will cost us – when we open our hearts by serving people in need of a warm breakfast we might have to miss attending Sunday morning worship in our own church and we might find it necessary to provide a little of ourselves to talk with those with whom we share a meal. When we open our hearts to those in need of fresh food it will cost us some time on Tuesday nights to work in the community garden. When we open our hearts to people with pets by offering our grounds as a place for them to have their pets blessed – when we open our hearts to people in nursing care facilities and take our pets to visit them it costs us.

You know I wouldn't have to stop – there's more – but, you get the picture. It costs to have open hearts – to care. Thanks for being a people with open hearts – a caring community of faith.

1. William Barclay, The Daily Study Bible Series: The Acts of the Apostles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), pp. 134-135.
2. Ibid., p. 135.