“The Power of the Gospel”
Acts 16:16-34

A Sermon Delivered by
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During our New Testament reading this morning we heard the story of Paul and Silas, who were on a missionary journey in the area of Philippi. Initially, things seemed to be going pretty well. There was a woman who was a fortune teller who began to follow Paul and Silas around declaring, "These men are bondservants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming the way of salvation."

At first glance, this might have seemed like a good thing– you know, free advertising. But she kept up this chant for many days and things started escalating very quickly. Paul became weary and finally cast the demonic spirit out of her. When this happened, of course, she lost her ability to predict the future. When you impact someone's financial bottom line, things tend to get ugly. The men who used her to make money got very angry and they brought Paul and Silas to the marketplace before a makeshift court, where they were stripped, severely beaten and thrown into the inner prison where their feet were fastened in stocks.

You may recall seeing modern day stocks, typically at tourist locations where kids are having their pictures taken while two pieces of wood are "fastened" together securing their heads and hands. In and of itself, it doesn't seem so bad, but consider that Paul and Silas were stripped of their clothing, severely beaten and then put into stocks where they continued to be tortured by being kept in an awkward position.

The jailer made the decision to put them in maximum security, to put them in the “inner prison” and their feet in stocks. He could have chosen to treat them lightly. After all, what did they ever do to him? He treated them roughly because they were criminals. I mean – after all – the entire town had condemned these two men. Obviously, they were guilty.
I've had opportunities to provide ministry to prisoners over the years. One of the things that I consistently pick up on is that the guards aren't always nice to them. Many of them get cynical because “they've heard it all before.”

As far as the jailer in Acts 16 is concerned, Paul and Silas are guilty. In his mind - they deserved what they got. I’m convinced that Paul and Silas knew this. They knew this man had already prejudged them.

So Paul and Silas were nice men trying to do the will of God. They had faithfully preached the Gospel and ended up getting violently and unjustly beaten, then thrown into maximum security jail.

And incidentally, lest you think this is an ancient issue, it is not. All over the world there are faithful believers who are sharing their faith and the same thing happens to them. They are brutally beaten and imprisoned. We can make all sorts of excuses: "Well, sharing Christ is illegal in that country; they should have known better," but the reality is that it is not right. It wasn’t right then and it is not right now.

In this account, the jailer was right there being just as mean and vindictive as everyone else. Paul and Silas would have had every reason to hate and despise him. But, instead, they shared their faith with him!

Now, there might come a time when you have the opportunity to share your faith with someone like that: Someone who doesn’t really like you. Someone who has hurt you or someone you care for. Whatever the reason, you don’t like them. You don’t want to talk to them about Christ because, frankly, they don’t deserve God's love. What they deserve is...to go to hell. You know someone who makes you feel that way.

Consider what would happen if God did the same thing to you and me. Romans 3:23 says “…All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” We’ve all sinned against God. We’ve done things that have hurt Him. We’ve said, done or thought things that alienate us from Him.
Colossians 1:21 says “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior.” Before we became Christians, Colossians says you and I were God’s enemies. In other words… if you and I got what we deserved, we’d all go to hell…and it wouldn’t be a party.

But God so loved the world (you and me) that He gave His only begotten Son. And what happened to his only begotten Son? He was crucified. God paid a terrible price so that you and I could be a part of His family.

But at one point, we were enemies. Paul knew this, because he had been an enemy of Jesus. Paul was a ringleader in the crowd that stoned Stephen to death. Stephen was the first Christian martyr to die for his faith. But that wasn't all. After that, Paul went “from house to house, (dragging) off men and women” and had them...thrown into prison (Acts 8:3)...Just like this jailer had thrown him into this jail. But God saved him. Now it was Paul’s chance to repay God’s kindness to him...To offer to this man the salvation God had so freely given to him.

When we are given an opportunity to share our faith with people who’ve not been nice to us, it becomes our chance to repay God for His kindness in saving us as well. It’s our opportunity to show God “we get it.” To show God that we understand that Jesus died for everyone… even the ones we don’t like. When we do that, we honor to our God.

After Paul and Silas were beaten, thrown into an inner prison and fastened in stocks, scripture tells us that they "were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” Acts 16:25 They were worshipping God, right there in that jail. They made it obvious whose they were. Everybody in the prison knew they loved Jesus and belonged to him. Now there’s a critical balance here: We don’t worship to show off, but you cannot deny the loyalty of one’s heart when he or she is sincere in his or her worship.

The next thing Paul and Silas did was to make it obvious that they cared for the jailer. Someone once said: “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care.”

During my first tour, I was stationed with Marines in North Carolina. I was really naive—having only worked in the church during my professional career. That was one of the things about
Navy chaplaincy that really appealed to me: I wanted to get outside the church walls and interact with those who would not otherwise step foot in a church. I remember my first month, taking it all in, thinking, "Man, these people are complete heathens! This could be a long tour." I’m not sure what I thought I was expecting but after recovering from my initial shock, I remember praying, "Lord, love these people through me." And The Lord is faithful. I fell more and more in love with those “heathens” every day. At this point, I don't think you can shake my devotion to the United States Marine Corps. That's what God can do.

When Paul and Silas were imprisoned, an earthquake freed them from their bondage. When the jailer woke up, he saw that all the prison doors were open and he was convinced that his life is over. If the prisoners escaped – he would pay with his life. And so he decided to avoid the pain, kill himself and get it over with.

Paul sees this… and he could have let the jailer take his own life. I mean, why should he care? This jailer had been mean to them. But Paul did care and he yells out: "Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!" Acts 16:28 He knows why this man is afraid. And he reaches out to him.

That’s where we need to watch for that kind of opportunity to share Jesus. It helps to realize that this is the kind of person the rest of the world turns its back on. The world tends to look for the companionship of those who are successful, who have it all together, and who are attractive and connected. But when a person’s life is falling apart they often find themselves alone. Jesus taught us to reach out the hurting and wounded: When they’ve lost their jobs. Lost their marriage. Lost their home. Lost a loved one. These are times when people need the message of hope from God. And that’s why it’s so critical that we step up when people are down.

There’s an interesting perspective here: Paul and Silas didn’t seek this man out. He sought them. He asked them, “What must I do to be saved?” God was at work softening his heart. Jesus said “I will send (the Holy Spirit) to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.” John 16:7b-8 It is the Spirit’s job is to convince human beings of their sin. When we share Christ with others, it’s not all on us. God is already at work behind the scenes convincing them of their need for salvation. He prepares the hearts of those with whom we can share our faith. And if we're watchful – if we’re paying attention – we can find God at work… and reach out to those who need Jesus. Before you tell people about Jesus, especially someone who
doesn’t like you, be obvious about whose you are and make it obvious that you care for them as an individual.

So, what happened to the jailer? Acts 16:31 says that Paul instructed him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your household." They went home with the jailer and explained to him and his family what it meant to believe in Jesus. Verse 33 says, “At that hour of the night… he and all his family were baptized.”

That’s the power of the Gospel: to share God’s greatest gift, the gift of salvation with everyone, but especially with those who have wounded us. Because we recognize that Christ did that for us, even while we were enemies. To God be the glory. Amen.