

“A Disturbing Faith”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 25, 2014**

New Testament Lesson: Acts 16:19-34

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 97:1-5

NBC Nightly News reported on Tuesday that ex-football players are claiming they were given a constant diet of pain pills in order to keep playing, despite having serious injuries. Among them is former Chicago Bear's star quarterback Jim McMahon. McMahon says he played with a broken neck and ankle that the trainers never told him about. Instead, he says, they filled him full of painkillers just to keep him in the game.

Steve Silverman, the attorney for McMahon and the other athletes, says the team owners have been putting profits before players.

Profits before players – is anyone here really surprised by that? It's kind of what the world has come to, isn't it? We see it in the workforce, where employees have become cogs in the wheel, just a means to an end, grinding it out day after day, with little personal regard for them as individuals.

This is similar to what Paul and Silas faced in our New Testament lesson today. Paul comes to the region of Macedonia and finds a world that puts profits before people – a world where, in this instance, a slave girl has value only for the money she can make for her owners, and where a group of travelers sharing a different worldview – the worldview of Jesus Christ – are tolerated just as long as they don't upset the system. Problem is, Christianity at its best tends to upset the system. “These men are disturbing our city,” say the slave owners; “they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.”

So in the Roman Empire, it's perfectly acceptable to value someone only for what he or she can do for you but following in the footsteps of Jesus just doesn't work there; it just gets in the way; it disrupts and disturbs the system.

Disturbing the system. That's a pretty dangerous thing to do. In Paul's time, it could get you thrown into jail. In our time – today – it can get you left behind; run over by our busy, fast-paced lives; or put you at a loss for where to turn when health starts failing, marriages break up, the money runs out, work is dragging you down, the car dies, the AC goes out, or any number of unexpected catastrophes that threaten to sink us in despair, despair in a world where it's business as usual despite any trouble we're having.

Just like the world Paul traveled through did more harm than good when it came to those in need, our world today; it doesn't seem to be doing so well, either. When it comes to **lending a little support to** those in need and helping people get back on their feet, too many people feel trapped, imprisoned by circumstances beyond their control, powerless amid a world that puts profits before people. And part of that is the world's fault and part of that is our fault.

When Paul faced such challenges, he stayed true to his calling as a follower of Christ, even though Christianity can be a disturbing faith – it tends to disturb the world around it. Have you ever thought of it that way – our faith as an instrument to shake things up a bit? Just look at what happened to Paul. Paul frees a girl from a system that completely dismisses her value as a human being, as a child of God, and Paul gets thrown into prison for his trouble.

Well it's the same these days. Too often doing the right thing has no apparent value to the "powers that be". When you give of yourself to someone in need – and I mean really give of yourself, to the point of suffering a little on your part – in the world's eyes, you've just been taken advantage of. But Paul wouldn't see it that way. God doesn't see it that way. Those who stay true to their faith, regardless of the risk or the cost, always come out on top. God has surprising and unexpected ways of protecting us when we keep up our faith practices.

An elderly woman had just returned to home from an evening Bible study when she was startled by an intruder stealing her valuables. "Stop!" she yelled, "Acts 2:38!" (Repent, and be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.) The burglar stopped in his tracks, and the woman calmly called the police. As the officer cuffed the man, he asked the burglar, "Why did you just stand there? All the lady did was yell a Scripture at you." "What scripture?" said the burglar, "She said she had an axe and two 38s!"

Sometimes in life, our faith is all we that can protect us and bring us through when things get rough. I mean look at Paul. He's been beaten, stripped of his clothing, and thrown into prison. The jailer puts him in the innermost cell and fastens his feet in the stocks; he's in leg irons.

And here's Paul, praying and singing praises to God. He's sharing the faith with his fellow prisoners. They hear him and listen to him. "Suddenly there (is) an earthquake.....and immediately all the doors (open) and everyone's chains (are) unfastened."

Don't you suppose there might be some chains in this world that God is just dying to unfasten, some circumstance in your life or in the life of others that needs someone like Paul, or Silas, or maybe you, someone to stand up and witness to the faith, to speak a word of hope amid despair, encouragement when all seems lost, and divine truth in a world that's too self-centered and so misguided? Can't you envision an opportunity in your life to let your faith disrupt business-as-usual; to let the light of Christ shine through?

That's what Paul does. Rather than complain about his situation or run away from it, Paul uses his circumstances to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here," says Paul, as the jailer is about to kill himself for failing in his duty.

Under the Roman system, that's what you did if you were a soldier or a guard. If you failed in your duty, you took your own life. Whereas with Jesus Christ, we give our lives to the higher good. That's our hope and conviction as Christians, a hope and conviction we remember all the more this weekend, leading up to Memorial Day.

As we honor those who gave their lives in service to their country – in selfless service to the higher good – let us also be mindful of our own commitment to the higher good as followers of Christ. Let us reflect on ways we could be seeking the higher good, ways that we can recommit ourselves to the principles of divine love, a love that love is patient and kind; a love that is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude; a love that does not insist on its own way and is not irritable or resentful; a love that does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

Paul describes such a love later in the Bible, in his letter to the Corinthians, a love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." That is our promise as Christians, and it is our gift to others. In Christ there is no condemnation, but rather mercy, and forgiveness, and hope for tomorrow. You have this in Christ, regardless of any difficulty you might be facing.

"Believe in the Lord Jesus," says Paul, "and you will be saved, you and your household." Paul is saying this to us, just as he said it to the jailer. And the jailer, hearing this, embraces the way of Jesus Christ, and he and his entire family are brought into the faith.

Regardless of what it is that holds us captive – whether we are imprisoned by financial worries, family difficulties, workplace struggles, or some other breakdown in life – the answer for us isn't to fight the system.

The answer is to keep the faith. Let your faith do the fighting for you. By turning to prayer when your world goes into a tailspin, by reaching out to the faith community when you need help and encouragement, by maintaining some type of a faith practice even though the world doesn't appreciate it, we can all be assured that God will not only be there for us, but also that others will be blessed by our Christian witness, and thus freed to draw closer to Christ as we draw closer to one another. Amen.