

McCabe United Methodist Church
Asking the Right Questions (Part 2)
Why Believe in Jesus
Acts 16:25-34
04-21-13
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This is the second sermon in our series called: Asking the Right Questions. Today we are asking: Why Believe in Jesus?

This is an important question for people living in a culture where: civility has been replaced with bickering and backbiting; where violence is more prominent than peacemaking; and language about entitlement programs is discussed openly, but greed is ignored...a world where Christ and God are often ignored.

We need to ask ourselves: what is the difference between being a “good person” and being a “Christian?” Our faith is very important to us, but so often we are content with being nice people and doing the right thing.

But, let me ask a question: how would we be different if we didn't believe in the Messiah?

I'm personally convinced that if we weren't Christians we would still be nice people. We would still try to help others, because we know it's the right thing to do. We would even give to the United Way, donate canned goods for the Thanksgiving food drive, and put a few bills and coins in the 'Red Kettles' at Christmas.

So, what is the difference between being a Christian and being a nice person? It's all about whom we live for. Do we live for ourselves and the world or do we live for Christ.

It's important for Christians to be honest with ourselves and name these truths: Money can't save us; Being Republican or Democrat can't save us; and Being conservative or liberal can't save us.

In today's scripture lesson we meet Paul and Silas who were traveling throughout Greece. They stopped in a town called Philippi, where they met a young slave girl who was filled with a spirit and had the gift of prophecy. For days she would follow them around the community and say:

“These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17b)

Paul began to get a little annoyed with this woman. He didn't lose his temper, but he did turn and say to the spirit within her:

"I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." (vs.18b)

This was a gift of grace and healing for the young slave girl. But it angered her masters, because they had used her gift of prophecy to make money in the marketplace. They were angry and worried that Paul's gift of healing would take away her gift of prophesy and she would no longer be able to make money for them.

The men called the authorities and hauled Paul and Silas before the magistrate. They said:

"These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." (vs. 20a)

Even the crowd turned on Paul and Silas. The magistrate had them stripped of their clothing, beaten with rods, flogged, and thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to keep them from escaping. He took the men into the center of the prison, placed their feet in stocks, and left them in the dark.

Following this terrible ordeal...Paul and Silas comforted themselves by singing songs and praying to God. Just imagine this scene...they were beaten, flogged, thrown into prison...and they still sang and prayed to God. The book of Acts reports the other prisoners sat and listened to them. Their songs and prayers must have been a powerful witness to their faith.

Do you remember the movie: *The Shawshank Redemption*? It's a story about a man who is falsely accused of his wife's murder. He is sent to prison where he is abused, then accepted and admired. At the end of the movie he finally escapes.

There is a moving scene when Andy locks himself in the library and plays beautiful music over the prison loudspeaker, inspiring prisoners in ways undreamed of in a place where people were locked in cages, abused, and beaten. Andy was thrown into solitary for this infringement of the rules. (Video clip 11:15 only)

At midnight there was a great earthquake that shook the foundations of the prison, the doors were opened and the shackles fell from their feet.

When the jailer awoke and saw the doors stood open. He thought the prisoners had escaped. He was afraid of the magistrate would blame him, torture him, and possibly put him to death. He drew his sword and prepared to take his own life, but Paul and Silas shouted out and assured him they were still in the cell.

Paul and Silas spoke to him and comforted him by telling him about their faith in Christ. It was both their actions and their faith which encouraged the jailer to turn his life over to the Messiah. That very night he and everyone in his house were baptized.

There was once woman in her nineties who was very ill. Her family believed she was nearing the end of her life. All of her family and friends gathered at her ranch. They stood beside her in a quiet prayer vigil waiting to see if she would recover or if the Lord would take her home.

Someone from town talked to a traveling revival preacher and asked if he would go and pray for this woman? He climbed onto his wagon and rode out to her ranch. When he arrived the family greeted him warmly and invited him inside. He walked over to the woman's bed, bent down beside her, and took her hand. When she opened her eyes he said: "I've been told you are very sick and you're about to die. I came here to pray for you, to forgive your sins, and to help you prepare to meet your maker."

Her eyes opened a little farther and she studied the man's face. She slowly reached out and turned over his hands. She looked at one hand and then at the other. Then she said: "You are an imposter!"

The preacher was taken aback and said: "What do you mean?"

"You are an imposter. The only one who can forgive my sins has nail prints in his hands. Only he can make me ready to meet my maker."

Do we know the man with nail prints in his hands? Would we be able to recognize him? I believe this is another way of asking: Do we know the difference between being a good person and being a follower of Christ?

Joaquin Phoenix starred in a movie about the life of Johnny Cash, called *Walk the Line* (2005). In one of the scenes Johnny is talking to the prison warden.

The Warden said: "Mr. Cash? The record company asks that you not play any songs that would remind the prisoners that they are in jail."

Johnny Cash replied: "Do you think they forgot?"

At another point in the film, there is a conversation between Johnny Cash and a Record Company Executive.

The executive said: "Your fans are church folk, Johnny. Christians. They don't wanna hear you singing to a bunch of murderers and rapists, tryin' to cheer 'em up."

Johnny Cash paused for a few moments and then said: "Well, they're not Christians, then."

There is a story about a little girl who collected dolls. One day a man was visiting her parents she decided to show him her doll collection. She had dolls of every shape and size, wearing clothing of every color and pattern that you can imagine, and their hair was of differing colors and lengths.

The man asked her: "Which one is your favorite?"

The little girl acted a bit embarrassed and replied: "I will show her to you if you promise not to laugh?"

He promised and the little girl ran out of the room. This surprised him because there were dozens of dolls spread across the room. She returned carrying a doll that was not shiny and new. The doll was missing most of its hair. Its clothing was tattered and torn. It was missing its arms.

The man asked: "What makes this doll so special?" It doesn't look like any of the others."

The little girl said: "I love this one most of all...because I'm afraid that if I don't love her, no one else will!"

Do you want to know the difference between being a good person and being a Christian?

1. Living as a Disciple of Christ helps us learn the joy of loving someone society deems unlovable.
2. Following Christ helps us live in a way that lifts people up when our culture pushes them down.
3. Believing in Jesus makes our lives richer...more meaningful... helping us step beyond the expectations of our culture by putting the poor first...the lost first...the outcast first! (Matthew 25:31-46)

We can do these things by leaning on the one who put us first...the one who saved us. He is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah...the one with nail prints in his hands.... Amen.