

Seventh Sunday of Easter
May 20, 2007

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Sermon by JJ Lynn, Seminarian in residence

Scriptures: Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

This past Thursday I had to appear at a court hearing for a traffic ticket I received in March. While I was sitting in the court room awaiting my turn I couldn't help but consider the story of Paul and Silas being thrown in Jail for casting an evil spirit out of a slave. Granted there are many things different between my court appearance and Paul's. I was allowed to defend myself, and I was not facing jail time or physical punishment.

What we have before us today are two awesome examples of selfless action seeking not personal glory but the glory of God. In the Gospel, at the moment before his betrayal and arrest Jesus prays for the disciples. Not for himself, but for those whom he loves on earth. And then we have Paul and Silas, who rather than flee the prison when the doors are flung open stays put because they do not want the person in charge of their imprisonment to be harmed.

Its an interesting thing that Jesus is praying to God that the disciples feel the love that God has for them, and that they remain in this love, and act in this love. Why does Jesus pray for us to remain in his love, and to act through that love? Because Jesus knows us. Jesus knows that we will falter in this love, Jesus knows we will disregard this love when it is inconvenient, that we will not act through love to all our neighbors, just to those we see as our neighbors. In the face of persecution Jesus prays for us, at a moment when I would likely be praying for my own safety Jesus takes this time to pray for me. Jesus prays that our work in creation will be for the glory of God, not for our glory. Our glory is short-lived and has no substance. The glory of Tony Romo doesn't heal the world. The glory of Clint Eastwood doesn't provide victory over death. The Glory of Pop Stars and Musicians doesn't unite races and sexes. The glory of Jesus is victory over death. The glory of Jesus can heal the world.

One of the things I find fascinating in this story of Acts, is the actual reason that Paul and Silas are thrown into Jail. The book of Acts tells us the people throw them in jail because they are disturbing their city. That's one way to look at it, but look closely and we find that the real reason they are put into Jail is because they disrupted the cash flow of some rich people. At first glance it seems strange that Paul would cast the spirit out of this slave girl. It seems to me that the slave girl is helping them in their endeavors. She is following behind them for several days proclaiming who they are, who sent them, and telling people to listen to them. It seems that if a girl with credibility as a fortune teller were following behind Paul and calling on people to listen to him this would be a good thing. But things aren't always what they seem, for in reality what Paul does by casting out the spirit is free the girl from the exploitation of her owners. They use her to make money, they exploit her and her abilities. In the Gospel we have Jesus praying that we all be made one, and love one another as he has loved us. But how can we love one another if we are exploiting one another? We see Paul do what is not expected, he goes against

the grain of society in a big way by depriving the owners of the slave girl their money making scheme, and he pays for it too by being persecuted, beaten and thrown into jail.

Paul takes away a source of income, this is not the socially cool thing to do! But God is glorified through this action. God is glorified through our un-coolness. Because by loving God's people without fear we are not following the standard of society. That's what we are called to be as Christians. We are called to work against the grain when the grain is to exploit and endanger people. Its not the accepted action of society to love people in such a way that we refuse to exploit them.

It's not the normal action in today's world to love a homeless person, because they must not be as good as us, or as special as us because they don't have what we have. They are people who are dirty and just don't try hard enough to contribute to society.

It's not the cool thing to love a person from a different social class than us. They just think they are better than us, and should just leave us alone, or they aren't as good as us, and aren't as sophisticated as us, because they don't eat at the fancy restaurants, and don't sit in the luxury boxes at the Cowboys game, or don't know how to dress when they go out to a concert.

And it is definitely not the hip thing to love someone who can't afford expensive clothes, and an expensive house, or someone that doesn't tell the funniest jokes, or has the best stories that everyone laughs at.

It's not hip to say no to drug use, and no to sex. Teenagers especially face these struggles every day of their lives with a constant barrage of conflicting messages.

It's not easy to stand against the crowd. But Jesus did it, Paul did it and so can we. When we stand up against injustice and unhealthy behavior Jesus stands beside us, Jesus prayed for the disciples to unite as one, and Jesus prays for us to unite in one, His prayer is not a one time prayer, Jesus wants us to live together and is cheering us on.

Jesus prays for us to become united as one, to make ourselves, all of humanity one, through living in his love for all of us. But to become one we have to love and serve one another, not exploit and cheat one another. We are called upon to accept and serve all people, even if our actions cause us to go against the grain of society. To live as one in the love of Christ we have to stand up in the face of persecution, we have to welcome with love those cast aside by society, and we have to do this with courage in the face of persecution.

By standing up for the oppressed and the poor we earn labels, usually not labels of respect, rather labels used to offend and discourage us, and make us question our convictions. When we stand up in the face of persecution and trust God is with us, and remember that Jesus is standing right beside us praying for us we see great things happen to the glory of God. We see doors thrown open and people saved and converted. We see people freed from bondage, and exploitation. Look what happens when Paul stands firm in his persecution. Not only is he protected, but the jailer and all his household are converted. Good things happen when we stand firm in our convictions, knowing Jesus is standing right beside us praying for us! Good things happen when we work for the Glory of God.

Imagine our world if we lived as Jesus wants us to live. Imagine what it would look like if we acted with pure unselfish love in all of our encounters.

Its hard to imagine isn't it? Growing up, one of my dad's favorite answers was "I haven't the foggiest notion." This was an answer usually given to us when we asked a tough question, usually questions about Human nature. I haven't the foggiest notion is an incredibly profound answer because it sums up the situation perfectly by saying it is completely un-understandable why that person there would harm their own child. They are questions that cannot begin to be answered. But I think this is how we feel about the kingdom of God sometimes. What would the world look like if we all lived in love for one another? I haven't the foggiest notion is not a valid answer. We are called to dream about that Kingdom and work toward that dream.

It would be a kingdom where the food pantry wasn't needed, and the summer reading program wouldn't be to fill a void. It would be a creation in which income class, race, sex, and age, all those things that divide would cease to matter. A world without modern slavery, a world without sexual exploitation.

Imagine what our relationships would look like. Imagine being able to walk up to a stranger on the street with none of our baggage and none of their baggage and being free to have an open and honest conversation with them, without holding anything back for fear they will use it against us, or worse yet get the wrong idea about us. This is a hard reality to imagine. After all every night when we watch the news, and every morning when we read the paper, we are confronted with death and hatred on what should be an unimaginable scale, but it has become the reality. Somehow the unimaginable has become the reality and what should be the reality has become the unimaginable.

How has this happened? It has happened because we refuse to honor the love of Jesus, and fail to work for God's glory. Rather we work for our glory. But Jesus still prays. And through Jesus praying we are forgiven and renewed.

Each week we share a moment together to renew ourselves. We share the gift of the last supper to renew our lives and refresh our perspective. Our perspective is refreshed because the Son of God breaks through that fogginess and helps us dream of a world based on love. It is our calling to work towards this world and become united as one humanity in the love of Christ. It is our calling to love as Jesus loves and go against the grain of exploitation and division seeking to become One body of Christ in this world.

Jesus conquered death and forgives our sins so that we are free to love one another without reservation. This gift from Jesus allows us to live without fear of judgment and no fear of retribution when we fail to love. But we don't embrace this gift. Instead of living free we enslave ourselves to our possessions, and to our desires. We enslave ourselves in our systems of operation. We have insurance systems that entrap us financially so we can be sure that we are covered in case of an accident.

Life comes at you fast? You're darn right it does, but insurance companies can't save us from those trials in life. That job has already been done by Jesus! Jesus died on the cross so that we can live free of death from sin, Jesus rose on the third day so that we can stand up for injustice, Jesus walked among us to show us how to love and serve, and Jesus prays that we will stand up and bring glory to his kingdom through our actions to each

other. Jesus stands beside us and cheers us on when we stand and say, “NO, you cannot exploit this child of God. Jesus prays that we will remember the love and actions that characterized his life when we stand up and say yes, you are welcome here, and we love you the way you are. Amen