

HALF-EMPTY or HALF-FULL?

Acts 16:16-34

There were two twin boys: one that was always optimistic, no matter the bad situations that he would sometimes find himself in; and the other, that was always pessimistic, even when good things happening around him. One day, his parents decided to get to the bottom of their behavior.

They wondered if an extreme environment of either good or bad could change the boys' attitudes. So, they took their pessimistic son and placed him in a room with all the best toys a child his age could want. There were electronic toys, video games, bicycles, puzzles, and many other things. Then they took their optimistic son and placed him in a room filled with horse manure. It was a terrible room, and its' stench filled their nostrils as they placed their son inside. They closed both doors to the rooms, both of which had small windows to view what was going on in the rooms.

Some time went by, and the boys' parents decided it was time to check on their boys. They decided to check on their pessimistic son first. They walked over to his room, peered through the small window on the door, and were shocked at what they saw: their son wasn't joyfully playing with all his wonderful toys; instead, he was bundled up in the corner, crying. They burst through the door and asked, "Son, why are you so sad?"

The boy replied, "Well, I have all these toys to play with but no one to play with me. I've tried to solve some of the puzzles, but they were too hard; the video games I played were too loud; and I fell off one of the bicycles. I don't like this room, and all these toys. I wish I had a better room full of toys."

The boys' parents were surprised that even a room full of awesome toys couldn't change their pessimistic son's attitude.

"Well," they thought, "maybe we should go check on our other son?" They walked over to the other room filled with horse manure and looked through the small window. Again, they were shocked by what they saw: their son was happily scooping up the horse manure and digging through it, as if it was the best thing he'd ever played with! His parents both looked at each other, astonished that their son could be this enthusiastic about a room full with horse manure.

They burst through the door and asked, "Son, why are you so excited?"

The boy responded, "Well, mom and dad, where there's this much horse manure, there's got to be a pony in here somewhere!"

Our attitude shouldn't depend on our circumstances. Even in difficult circumstances, there's always a silver lining – or a pony in there somewhere!

In our text from Acts 16, Paul and Silas would be the ones digging through manure in search of that pony. Seriously, here they have been not only imprisoned on false charges, they were harshly beaten with canes – yet when the chains fall off during the earthquake rather than make haste and leave the jail, they stay put much to the relief of the jailer. The event which caused their arrest shows that Paul and Silas were on their way to pray when they encountered a slave woman with a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. Apparently, this was not the first such meeting of Paul with the woman she had been following them for days, proclaiming: "These people are the servants of the Most High

God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!” Paul, in his curmudgeon way, had become totally annoyed with her so he rebuked the spirit in her and cast it out in the name of Jesus! What Paul did not bargain on is the owners of the servant girl became angry with Paul for his action as it caused them to lose a very lucrative moneymaking relationship with the woman.

Although Paul and Silas are sitting chained in jail, they are praying and singing hymns to God. They have just been arrested and brutally beaten and thrown into prison. While I would probably be yelling at God for the injustice of it all, these two are singing and praying. This is not exactly the response I would have expected from Paul and certainly not the response most people would have in like situation. Then, at midnight, a violent earthquake opens the doors of the prison and unfastens everyone’s chains. The jailer assumes his prisoners have escaped, and with a deep sense of shame he draws his sword to kill himself. But Paul calls out and urges him not to harm himself, since the prisoners are all still present. Calling for lights, the jailer rushes in and falls down trembling before Paul and Silas. (Homiletics online, June 2, 2019) The jailer clearly struggles to wrap his head around what his eyes and ears are telling him. When an earthquake shakes loose prison doors, prisoners are supposed to escape.

So, why are these prisoners still here?

In this time of confusion, the jailer’s old framework gives way to a new one. He brings Paul and Silas outside and asks, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They instruct him to believe in Jesus Christ, and then both he and his household are baptized. The story ends with the jailer showing hospitality to Paul and Silas by throwing a celebratory feast (vv. 16-34).

This whole scenario is not typical – prisoners who find they are unexpectedly freed, generally do not hang around to be re-shackled. Guards who ‘fall down’ on their duty were expected to fall on their swords – so great was their shame and fear of what their superiors would do. This is the beauty of the New Testament which has story after story of Jesus turning the customary way of life over and on its’ side. Jesus not only shakes things up he is showing a new way of living. Indeed, if we look at the account of Jesus’ entry into ministry in Luke 4, Jesus himself tells the people his vision and purpose for his ministry: *Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.”*

Right from the start, all that God has sent Jesus to do will turn the world upside down. Jesus came to change God’s good creation back to God’s original plan and in doing so royally shakes things up. I am always amused that the number one most resistant response from established churches is in regard to change. Everything, and I mean **EVERYTHING** about our Christian walk is about change or perhaps to put it in more palatable words – Christ came to claim each one of us God’s own and to restore every person to right relationship with God by making us into the men and women God always intended. I don’t know how else this can happen except through change.

In every time and place, the Christian faith is often a constant source of unsettling information. As an innovative idea, it stresses us, surprises us, confuses us and then – once accepted – changes our lives.

In the same way, this story from Acts helps us grasp the stress and transformation of Christian living. Each element of the story contains a piece of unsettling information that can change our lives.

First element: *You are valued for who you are, not for what you do.* After the midnight earthquake, the jailer feels deeply embarrassed that he has lost his prisoners. In noble Roman fashion, he draws his sword to commit suicide. But Paul shouts, “Do not harm yourself” (v. 28). The jailer then rushes into the cellblock, falling down before Paul and Silas. Bringing them outside, he asks them, “What must I do to be saved?” They answer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (vv. 29-31).

Although we do not live in a first-century Roman colony, we tend to share the jailer’s belief that *our value is based on what we do*. If we fail to achieve success in school or in work, we feel worthless. Many of us believe our value is based on our performance, and when we face failure, there’s no doubt a small voice somewhere deep inside whispers that we’re total losers.

God says, “Your value is based on who you are, not on what you do.” Each of us is a precious child of God with worth that comes from being made in the image and likeness of God.

Second element: *You are saved through your faith in Jesus, not by the gods of success, beauty and popularity.* After hearing the word of the Lord, the jailer washes the wounds of Paul and Silas. He and his family are baptized, and then he brings everyone into his house and throws a feast. The jailer and his whole family rejoice that he has become a believer in God (vv. 32-34). Although we do not think of ourselves as pagans, we have to admit that we fall down in front of a lot of false gods today. “We burn incense at the altar of success and beauty and popularity,” writes Meg Hunter-Kilmer. “We bow down before soccer and standardized tests and sleepover parties. ... Maybe it’s the gods your parents worshipped or the gods of the culture you live in, but if you’re anything like me, your life is filled with idols.” To his credit, the jailer falls down before two faithful Christians, Paul and Silas. He trades his faith in the Roman gods for faith in Jesus the Christ, putting his trust in the One who can truly save him.

Third element: *Faith is never entirely personal but leads you to serve others and practice hospitality.* Paul was certainly correct to say to the Romans, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). This is true, no doubt about it.

But like everything in the Bible, such a truth can create confusion. The problem with this verse is that it gives the impression that faith is primarily an individual commitment, a relationship between the individual and Jesus.

The jailer in Philippi sees a larger truth, which is *that personal faith leads to communal action*. He immediately serves Paul and Silas by washing their wounds. And then he practices Christian hospitality by throwing a feast for his guests and his household.

Christian life is full of unsettling information. When we see God at work in our lives, we begin by trying to make sense of it. Then we get overwhelmed and wonder if our eyes are playing tricks on us. Finally, when we accept it, we find that our old framework gives way to a new one.

You are valued for who you are. You are saved through your faith in Jesus. Faith leads you to serve others and practice hospitality. (Homiletics online, June 2, 2019)

In closing, a story that perfectly illustrates the very content of my message. It also gives an excellent example of looking at the glass half full instead of half empty, and it perfectly describes much of the mission of Marquis Memorial.

I was parked in front of the mall, wiping off my car. I had just come from the car wash and was waiting for my wife to get out of work. Coming my way from across the parking lot was what society would consider a bum. From the looks of him, he had no car, no home, no clean clothes and no money. There are times when you feel generous, and then there are other times when you just don't want to be bothered. This was one of those "don't want to be bothered" times. "I hope he doesn't ask me for any money," I thought to myself. He didn't. He came and sat on the curb in front of the bus stop, but he didn't look like he could have enough money to even ride the bus. After a few minutes he spoke. "That's a very pretty car," he said. He was ragged, but he had an air of dignity around him. I said, "Thanks," and continued wiping off my car. He sat there quietly as I worked. The expected plea for money never came. As the silence between us widened, something inside me said, "Ask him if he needs any help." I was sure that he would say, "Yes." "Do you need any help?" I asked. He answered in three simple words that I shall never forget. We often look for wisdom in great men and women. We expect it from those of higher learning and accomplishments. I expected nothing from this man but an outstretched, grimy hand. His answer took me completely by surprise. "Don't we all?" he said. I was feeling high and mighty, successful and important, above a bum in the street, until those three words shook me to the core. "Don't we all?"

I needed help. Maybe not for bus fare or a place to sleep, but I needed help. I reached in my wallet and gave him not only enough for bus fare, but enough to get a warm meal and shelter for the day. Those three little words rang in my ear. No matter how much you have, no matter how much you have accomplished, you still need help, too. And no matter how little you have, no matter how weighed down you are with problems, even without money or a place to sleep, you can give help. Even if it's just a compliment, you can give that. You never know when you may see someone who appears to have it all. He may be waiting on you to give him something he desperately needs, a different perspective on life, a glimpse of something beautiful.

Maybe that man was just a homeless stranger, or maybe he was more than that. Maybe he was a messenger sent by God to minister to a soul who was too comfortable in himself.

Take the following words home with you. Write them on a piece of paper and tape to your bathroom mirror. Put them as a note in your children's and spouse's lunch! And...may God engrave them on your hearts, minds and souls.

You are valued for who you are. You are saved through your faith in Jesus. Faith leads you to serve others and practice hospitality. And all of God's people said!