

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday,,May 16, 2010.

In the name of God – Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

One of my favorite books, to which I return often, is by Albino Luciani, published in 1976, a collection of his own letters to folks as varied as Dickens, Mark Twain, Christ, Luke, Pinocchio, and Sir Walter Scott. It is a lovely book by a lovely man, who for 33 days in 1978, before his untimely death, was Bishop of Rome, John Paul the September Pope. He was asked by a parishioner once if he could recommend a good history of the early church. His answer, “Try the one by Luke.” Indeed. We know that one by two names, the Gospel According to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles, but it is really one work, artificially divided when the New Testament was assembled way back when.

Luke, a physician and historian, emphasized more than the other three evangelists I think issues of what in the early 20th century became known as the social gospel. Luke does not let us forget for a moment Jesus’ preferential concern for the downtrodden, the marginalized of society. The poor, the hungry, the lonely, the unemployed, the mentally ill, the incarcerated, the homeless. I could go on and on, but we know who those folks are, and it isn’t them. Us is more like it, certainly closer to the truth, for there are those in this relatively well off parish church who are or have at one time or another been in each of those unfortunate categories, or are candidates. Again, aren’t we all?

In the story from Acts we heard earlier, Paul and Silas are in Greece, in Philippi. Paul had heard in a dream the request that he cross the Bosphorus and bring the

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Gospel to Europe. Had he not done so, would we be here in this holy place this morning? Good question. Paul and Silas encounter an unusual young woman, a slave girl, who made a lot of money for her owners by soothsaying, fortune telling, through her “spirit of divination.” We don’t even know her name, but I always picture her in my mind’s eye with a metal slave collar and perhaps a leash, not unlike the stereotypical organ grinder’s monkey. Biblical scholars are of several minds about this unusual woman, but she “annoyed” Paul. He clearly thought she was possessed of a spirit, not a good thing, so he called the spirit out of her, “in the name of Jesus Christ,” and it worked. The spirit left her “that very hour”. We would likely say today, 2000 years later, that she was mentally ill, and healed in this story. As many of us know, the mentally ill can be annoying, difficult, combative even, self-centered in the extreme, crazy to put a word on it. Our temptation may be to see those folks and breathe an audible sigh of relief that we aren’t where they are. Again though, the mentally ill aren’t them, but us. Jesus encounters them several times and we encounter them here and elsewhere. As Dixie Carter once said of New Orleans, with its unusual mix of alcohol and humidity, “We don’t hide our crazy people. We bring them out and parade them around”.

I know something about this. Maybe five or six years ago I took communion to a woman on a locked psychiatric ward at Duke. We had a good visit, and in order to leave I had to ask a nurse to unlock the door for me. As the three of us, the nurse, the patient and I, stood at the door, the nurse turned to the young woman and said, “Honey, if he can make it, you can make it.” I had neither recognized nor remembered the nurse from the week or so I spent on that same ward in 1986, though she

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remembered me, to my delight and chagrin. And she would I am sure be glad to know I took my Zoloft this morning. Unless a cracked rib counts, I have never broken a bone. My guess though is that while a lot easier to photograph, a badly broken bone is no more real or painful, and perhaps less so, than depression or other forms of mental illness. Whatever else mental illness is, it isn't fun, whether to those who suffer from it, to those around them, or to their family members. No wonder the slave woman annoyed Paul, but then he reached out to her, in a prayer of deliverance and healing. And that helps. A generous mixture of prayer, medication, love, time and good humor is a remedy hard to beat. In my own situation I remember my last night on that ward at Duke. It was April and I told my doctor I thought it would be most therapeutic for me to go see how the Durham Bulls fared that evening, down at the old ball park. He agreed. Who wouldn't? The mentally ill are interesting folks, not only like us, they are us. I hesitated a long time about revealing this part of my checkered past to you, but then I figured most would likely not be surprised, and some might be relieved.

But that's not the end of the story from Acts, for the next thing we know, Paul and Silas are in the joint. It is remarkable how many of Jesus' followers over the years have done time when you think about it. I remember the night I was ordained priest here 15 years ago. There were perhaps 20 or so prison alumni here that evening and after the service I was talking with one when a woman came up to me sort of breathlessly and said "I hear there are a bunch of convicts here tonight." My response, "Indeed so. Here's one." Again, they look just like us, and for a good reason, they are us, not them, but us. Our heating and air conditioning system is

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serviced by a friend who did time for drug dealing. My car too. And the Director of Christian Education at a nearby Presbyterian church did federal time with Martha Stewart. Somewhere I have their recipe for microwave cheesecake. In every church where I have spoken or preached about ministry to the incarcerated over the years, folks have come up to me afterward and told me of a husband, a child, a parent, or a sibling in prison, or who was in prison. And St. Luke's is no exception. Nor are bishops. I can think of three with children in prison.

Paul and Silas got locked up for interfering with the livelihood of the slave girl's owners, for freeing the organ grinder's monkey as it were. Paul and Silas were intermeddling Jews who ignored the conventional wisdom of "Don't Mess with Rome." Interestingly, and I cannot tell you how often I have seen this happen, they found opportunity for ministry in their unfortunate incarceration. Paul and Silas did what we sometimes forget to do. They bloomed where they were planted. Instead of whining about their own sad lot, they focused on others. They prayed and sang, and the others listened to them. Prayer and music, arguably another form of prayer, can be pretty calming. A priest in Argentina, imprisoned during the bad times there a generation ago, learned what Dietrich Bonhoeffer learned in his German prison, that prayer and hymns can drive the gendarmes nuts, perhaps because they celebrate and emphasize the benevolent God they cannot control. In the Argentine cell, the priest had neither bread nor wine, so he held out his broken dirty hands and said "This is my body, given for you" and then made the sign of the Cross and blessed each of his colleagues. We make do, we bloom where we are planted, and we remember those in prison, as Paul, Silas, and Christ were in prison.

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I was struck recently by a letter in the paper in support of a judicial candidate and an ad run by that candidate. Both were dismissingly critical of an opponent for visiting a friend in prison, something Jesus unambiguously asks us to do. Interesting, and telling. I voted for the visitor, but she lost, at least politically, though I imagine she sleeps well. We forget sometimes that the sanction, the punishment, is being away from home, in prison, and not something heaped on after one arrives there. Criminals are not the only ones who reap what they sow.

This story from the Acts of the Apostles is popular in prison chapel worship because of the jailbreak subplot. We are told there was a great earthquake, causing the cell doors to open and the guests' shackles to fall off. The jailer panicked, fearing that not only his job but his life was at stake. Roman law was hard on jailers who allowed escapes, even innocently as here. His stoic atheism left him, as happens to folks in hard times, and in a complete turnabout he threw himself on the mercy of Paul and Silas, confessed his newfound faith in the risen Christ and took Paul and Silas to his own house. There he cleaned their wounds, and he and his family were baptized. Nelson Mandela converted a number of his keepers at Robben Island, and converts people yet. The next time you encounter prisoners, whether in the flesh or on the news, remember this story of Paul and Silas. Prisoners aren't them, they are us, and as Anne said in an email to me the other day, they have the face of Christ.

We see that face of Christ, if we look hard enough, at all times and in all places. For a number of reasons I well remember the day our youngest son Will was born, 32 years ago at Duke Hospital. It was a brutally hot day in June and not long after Will arrived we were told that Sara's room was ready on what was then Williams Ward, ~~of~~

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named for some old doctor, not Ted Williams. A 15 year old girl had also given birth that evening, and her baby was several hours ahead of Will. She was all alone and obviously terrified. In the casual conversation one makes on such occasions we learned she had been waiting for a bed a long time, hours in fact. When we were told Sara would be taken to her room right away, we pointed out that the young girl was very much ahead of us in line, only to be told that she is a public patient, i.e. a charity case, not a well insured private patient like Sara. In other words, she was one of them. Well, she wasn't, and we have long regretted not making more of an issue of it, though I can't imagine we would have prevailed. Folks who have erected barriers to keep them out don't like to take them down. I hope that no longer happens at Duke, and I doubt it does.

Christ himself never thought of his followers as them rather than us, as evident in his somewhat rambling soliloquy in the Gospel today, from John. It follows a section of what we call his high priestly prayer at that fateful Passover in Jerusalem. He worries that his disciples are all too human, unprepared for what awaits them when he is gone, not up to the hard tasks at hand. So he cries out to God the prayer of all parents: "I do not pray that you should take them out of this world, but that you should keep them safe from evil." And he ends with the prayer "that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

May that be our thought and prayer for all those we have learned or been taught to think of as them, particularly those who annoy us as the crazy slave girl annoyed Paul. But may we also react as he did, with healing love. That they, and

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remember they are us, not them, be kept safe from evil and be made whole in the name of the risen Christ.

AMEN

St. Luke's

16 May 2010