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The Worship of God • May 29, 2022



THE SCRIPTURE
Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, 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." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be

saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

THE MESSAGE
"Paul Sang Bass and Silas Sang Tenor"
Mark Briley

Have you ever gone through something with another person, or even a group of people, which bonded you for life because of that experience? The experience may be as momentary and serious as a car crash or as euphoric as an epic road trip to a concert of your absolute favorite band of all time. There are moments that bond us to people that we just can't forget.

It's Memorial Day Weekend – a time when we remember and honor those who have given their lives in the name of protecting our freedoms. There are stories about sharing foxholes with comrades that surely bond you for life.

My great Uncle Harold went down on the USS Indianapolis that was torpedoed in the open seas at the tail end of World War Two. It was the ship referenced in the movie *Jaws* as those who survived the impact and sinking of the ship faced the realities at sea for days including a number of our service members who were killed by sharks. My uncle was in sick bay at the time of the attack which was not terribly far from the impact of the torpedo, so we think he died on impact. News wasn't immediate in those days, of course, and so my family didn't get word for weeks about Uncle Harold. In fact, a handwritten letter from Harold arrived sometime after the attack which was a treasure the family would hold onto. Harold's daughter who was never old enough to remember her dad in person, bonded for life with some other families who lost their loved one to the same fate.

These experiences, good or bad, have a way of solidifying relationships. Do you have any friends like this? These are the "*so there we were*" friendships... the ones when you get together, whether spoken or unspoken, you know you've been there... and through some stuff... together. I am honored to have a number of friends like this. Some who at some point literally said, "*I'm in 100%*" when we were looking at potentially tough situations. Nothing beats an all-in friend, you know. What I've noticed, however, is that all these friendships I hold... many grounded in those foxhole or pivotal moments of pain or joy situations... is that there is a constant thread beyond just those bonding moments. There's a grounding depth that makes the difference...

and it comes down to a layer of faith. Would you believe, there's a study that may suggest why? Let me tell you...

Harvard Professor Robert Putnam and Notre Dame scholar, David Campbell, wrote a book with the findings of their research and study of relationships. It's entitled: *"American Grace: How Religion is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives."* It's a decade old now and therefore in the *"Before Times"* as I like to say, distinguishing the pre- and post-COVID seasons of history. A core of the research discerned that religious people (*not just Christian people but religious people of various kinds*) are three to four times more likely to be involved in their community than are nonreligious people – more likely to work on community projects, belong to voluntary associations, vote in local elections, attend public meetings and donate both time and money to public causes, including secular causes. Their study also revealed that religious people are, in general, just *"nicer."* Some make take issue with this, and I understand. The study revealed, however, that religious people do good deeds, help both neighbors and strangers, give money to panhandlers and let others cut in front of them in line at a higher rate than non-religious people. Interesting. What was more interesting yet was that Putnam and Campbell say the reason religious people do these deeds and are this way at a higher percentage than others is not because of religious teaching as we might assume. They're not trying to secure a place in heaven or do so out of fear of divine judgment. The number one driver of this good is because of the relationships they have in their places of worship. The authors theorize that if someone from your *"moral community"* (as opposed to, say, someone from your bowling league) asks you to volunteer for a cause, you're more likely to agree.

*"The effect of these relationships is so strong, say the authors, that people who attend religious services regularly but don't have any friends there behave more like nonreligious people than fellow believers when it comes to civic involvement. "It's not faith that accounts for this," says Putnam. "It's faith communities." Faith-community relationships are so powerful that the authors have dubbed them "supercharged friends."*¹ This made so much sense to me and why I've always held onto the phrase I once heard that says, *"Your friends determine the quality and direction of your life."*

It's also why you are most like the people you spend the most time with. Are you positive, are you negative, are you helpful, compassionate, selfish? Who are your spending time with? That may tell the story. Are you investing in supercharged friendships?

¹ This quote comes from Brian Kaylor's homiletical work connected to this Acts passage entitled, "Supercharged Friendship." This message was shaped by this work and Kaylor's research. He utilizes the following source in uncovering the findings of the study.

Burke, Daniel. "Religious people are better citizens, study says." *Religion News Service*, May 13, 2009. religionnews.com/index.php?/mstext/religious_people_are_better_citizens_study_says/.

A good read of the book of Acts makes a good case for this theory. We pick up in the Acts account today right where we left off last week. That seldom happens that we end a verse one week and pick up at the next verse the following week. But there we were... Paul, Silas and company get this vision to enter an unknown and foreign territory – a place where people of faith were not all that valued which made it a bit of a foxhole experience for Paul and Silas – our supercharged friendship case study today. They met Lydia who converts to the Jesus Way and jumps right into leadership. They're serving together day in and day out to share God's love in Christ in this new place. Christianity wasn't a known commodity back then of course so they didn't have any real built-in credibility nor tremendous baggage to carry around. They were probably hosting VBS type stuff for kids and setting up bags tourneys in public parks to attract some people, so they could share the gospel with them. Paul and Silas were guys who were in it to win it... quit their jobs, cashed out their 401k's, and left their comforts of home for this cause of Christ that had transformed their lives from the inside out.

So *there. they. were...* going about this work in Philippi and being followed and harassed by a young girl day after day who was said to be possessed by a demon. If you had a unique gift of any kind or if you were a little different in any way – people in those days just said, “*She gotta demon fa sho.*” There was no Psych Department at the University or anything studying the mind and behavior and the like. So, everything was just the work of a demon. You got a nervous tick? Demon. You run faster than everyone else? Demon. You can't blow a bubble? Bubble demon.

Anyway – this young girl's demon was believed to give her fortune telling powers, so she was enslaved by some Carnies to make money out in public by telling fortunes. For whatever reason, she got all hell-bent about what Paul and Silas were up to. She was their shadow... just taunting them day and night... wherever they went. She would protest with clever signs: “*New name, same old game!*” and she'd tell everyone -- “*He says his name is Paul, but he's really Saul from Tarsus who was just a bad dude.*” She would yell – “*They think they're God's gift to you... that they've got some track to salvation... but they ain't worth a bull!*”

And so, the text says, “*Paul got all annoyed with her and finally turns and says, “In the name of Jesus, demon get out of her.”* We'd like to think Paul just wanted to help this young woman who was being used by some greedy opportunists, but it seems he was just losing his mind over what he perceived as annoying nagging. Instead of turning the other cheek he yells, “*Would you get off my backside!*” Some people don't bring out our Christian best, right? Are there some people in your life that just don't bring the love out of you? I had a mentor who always told me, “*You'll always have some people on your VDP list – Very Difficult People – that is. Don't let them bring you down and do*

your best to set up appropriate boundaries so they don't dominate your time nor get the best of your energies." Got any VDP's?

So, this young girl – one of Paul's VDP's – is freed of the demon but turns out, also now freed from her gift of fortune telling and once you mess with somebodies' bottom line, they're coming after you. So, her owners whose profits off her back are vanishing, cause a stink to the authorities and convince them that Paul and Silas are up to no good. They trump up some phony charges, apprehend Paul and Silas, beat them, and put them in the depths of the slammer – shackled and in that inner most dungeon cell where there is no chance of them getting out.

Now... it's important to note they go through this *together*. It's a painful and terrible experience but they are supercharged friends – in this purpose and mission together – which bonds them in ways nothing else does. And the truth is, we don't know how tight Paul and Silas are ahead of this missionary journey. We know more about Paul and his background but don't get much about Silas. Acts 15 tells us that Silas is a leader "*among the brothers*" which, in that context, meant he was a member of First Christian Church, Jerusalem – probably a deacon and board member – maybe played second base on the church softball team. Silas would have known of Paul because Silas was one of the leaders chosen to take Paul's letter to the other congregations in the region regarding the Jerusalem Church Council's decision to include Gentiles in the movement. This was church stuff!

You know, friends, when you're sitting in board meetings or something at the church and we're racking our brains about budgets, and buses, and the price of chicken for the fellowship dinner, we're doing the work that the Church has always done. It's all part of the joint, supercharged effort, to be a presence in the world that makes a difference following Love's lead.

All to say, we don't have any reason to believe Paul and Silas were golfing buddies or anything. At minimum, as Paul chooses Silas for this journey, we know that Paul sees something in Silas that would make for a good partner in the effort. They could do something together that neither of them could do alone. Some of my best friends over the years have come by chance but my friends who have stuck the most have come via the supercharge – through respect and passion and a common connection that says, "*We can partner well in this for the good of Christ and community.*"

I think this is a key reason faith communities matter so much – it's a synergy of people who connect with purpose and that brings up the strength of entire cities and beyond. That's powerful. Would Silas have gone out and done this work if Paul hadn't invited him? There's nothing to indicate that he had these intentions. He likely went because Paul, a member of his "*moral community*" asked him to. But once Silas said, "*I'm 100%*

in” they become supercharged in this effort together – even when in shackles ... a *there-we-were* moment if there ever was one.

In these *after-times*, to hold with the pre/post COVID lingo, everything is much more mobile, virtual, and much less personal and proximate. Virtual community is valuable and here to stay for sure. I’m grateful for the way it allows to stay connected across miles and time. But... this research and even the witness of Scripture says, there’s something to this tangible presence in a faith community that sparks something important. To be in “*the room where it happens*,” makes for something that cannot be replaced. There’s a supercharged reality to being together in this faith-filled way.

And this text is a prime example... Paul and Silas, beaten, battered, and bruised, sing in prison. That gets a chapter in their autobiography, right? I title this chapter, “*Paul Sang Bass and Silas Sang Tenor*.” A little nod to the old Johnny Cash song. Imagine these men in a prison basement, probably can’t even sit down because of the wounds on their backsides... but they are singing. I’m sure they were exhausted. It was midnight. They’d been through it all day. Maybe they were even bickering a bit... who knows... but I’ll give them the space to be human and frustrated. Maybe one of them just started singing in that spirit of “*if you can’t laugh, you’ll cry*.” “*There’s within my heart a melody*,” Paul starts in. Or maybe Silas started with Harry Styles, “*In this world, it’s just us... you know it’s not the same as it was*.” If you’ve ever been in some place and whether it was joyous and the crowds belted out “*Sweet Caroline (bah, bah, bah)*” or it was somber and a solitary voice starts in, “*Amazing Grace how sweet the sound...*,” there’s power in a song of solidarity.

Whether they planned it, or it just bubbled up from their supercharged calling, the duo is singing hymns and people take notice. The other prisoners perk up. Some of them probably cursed them out as they were trying to sleep but at some point, they all take notice – “*Who are these guys that can go through hell and keep singing about heaven?*” And the supernatural opens the story further. There’s an earthquake. Shackles fall off all the prisoners, the prison gates open and freedom is just a step away. But no one moves. *Not one*. The guard on duty awakens to the perceived chaos and jailbreak and is ready to end his life as that was the typical fate if an inmate broke free on your watch. But Paul says, “*Pull it together, friend. We’re all here. No one’s going anywhere.*”

This new foxhole moment, however, opens the guard and all who were present to hear the gospel. And the guard is all in. He takes the guys and cleans their wounds – the wounds that he may have had part in inflicting himself – and he says, “*Will you sing that song for my family? Will you tell them the story of Jesus? Can you baptize us in the bathtub?*”

When you see and experience the gift of a true supercharged relationship – what we hope to be as a church – you can't help but want to be part of it. As our board chair, David Holmes, said to the board last Tuesday night, *"There's not a thing that happens in this city where someone is being served or uplifted that doesn't have someone from Broadway in the mix."* And it wasn't to be an exhaustive statement, so don't send me an email about some place you didn't see a Broadway person – after all, you were there so... (☺). But seriously, the sentiment was powerful. We are supercharged friends, empowered by God's Spirit when we gather and when we work in our city for the good of our neighbors. Thank you for being such a loving presence in our community. And remember that whenever and wherever you are – you bear witness to that supercharge and you have more influence than you think to invite another, like Paul invites Silas, *"Hey... come with me... let's do this together."*

We see the pains of the world. I preached much of last week on the horrors of what transpired in a Buffalo grocery store and can't make it to the very next Sunday without another mass shooting – this time of innocent children and teachers.

Gloria Beranek spoke so poignantly and beautifully about her closeness to the war in Ukraine as a teacher in the Czech Republic. But her advice when we ask, *"What can we do?"* She points her fingers right here, in this way, to our own soil, to our community. The best way to heal the world is to be part of the healing of the one in front of you. Do for one what you wish you could do for all. Serve a neighbor. Feed a stranger. Be a good friend. Invest in some supercharged relationships.

Sing tenor to another's bass. If you ever wonder, *"Why am I here?"* it may be that you haven't uncovered that purpose quite yet. But consider this... You may be here because of a partnership with someone else sitting in this space right now that can heal our city. Or maybe it's a whole group of people here that you haven't joined yet. It may be because of that announcement that is made about a new study or a new service project or something else. Maybe you've normally said, *"Nah. Not for me."* Or *"I ain't got time for that."*

Maybe today you say, "Yes." And who knows; that simple "yes" may lead to a supercharged friendship... the very reason you're here again and again, or why you've come for the very first time, today. Friends, I don't have those answers. I pray this for and with you today and invite you to look forward it with a wide-open spirit. Those super-charged relationships change things.

May it be so...

SONG OF FOCUS

"I Will Praise You, My God, and My Strength"

BASED ON PSALM 59:16-17, MUSIC BY ED VARNUM

I will praise you, God! I will sing of your strength.

In the morning, I will sing of your love.

My fortress, my refuge in times of trouble,
I will praise you, my God, and my strength!

And I will sing to you, my God, and my refuge,
my God on whom I can rely.

And I sing of you, of your everlasting love.
I will praise you, my God, and my strength.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH