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Series: Membership Vows
Sermon: Witness

Acts 16:16-40 (NIV)

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” 18 She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

19 When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. 20 They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar 21 by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

22 The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. 23 After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. 24 When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. 27 The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

29 The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. 33 At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. 34 The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

35 When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” 36 The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.”

37 But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

38 The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. 39 They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. 40 After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

Sermon

What do you think of when you hear the word “Evangelism”? “Evangelism”. It’s almost a dirty word, isn’t it. When I hear the word Evangelism, I think of the TV personalities, the Jim Bakers, the Swaggarts, the fancy clothed sweating faith healers that plague our Sunday morning channel programming with pleas for funding and your faith will make you well. I didn’t grow up in the Bible Belt, just north, sort-of like the Bible Belly button. But if you’ve ever lived down South, let me tell you, there is no escaping their Hallelua, Praise Jesus, alter-calling, hands in the air, rollin in the aisles, faith-healing, big-combover hair, Bible in one hand and a microphone in the other, offering you, telling you, preaching at you, that salvation is just an Amen away. I don’t know about you, but that approach, that style of sharing you faith, typically leaves a bad taste in my mouth. I’m more apt to back away than to join in the praise chorus. And, it didn’t help that some of the major TV figures got busted for serious crimes, from embezzlement of bukoo bucks to picking up call girls. It took away from the appeal of their message. Evangelism. If that is evangelism, I don’t want any part of it. If that is the only way of sharing your faith, then forget it. When I was in college, I remember a fellow student who wanted to share his faith with me. I said O.K. And he went in for about twenty minutes on his beliefs, why he believed what he did and why he was sharing this with me. I listened politely, even though I thought it was a little wacked. After his monologue, I asked him if I could share my faith with him. You could probably guess his response. He didn’t want to hear anything about what I believed, or why. His interest level went way down. Looking back, I realize that he didn’t want to share his faith, he wanted to give it. He wanted to give it. Granted, I’m speaking from my own personal experience, maybe you receive positive feelings when we talk about evangelists or high intensity conversion moments. That’s fine, you will like where this sermon is heading. If you don’t like in-your-face theology, where people need to live and let live, where religion is something that is just between you and God, that’s fine - you will also probably like where this sermon is heading.

Throughout the ages, the church has been in the business of evangelism. Finding or making converts into the ranks of Christianity. And for the most part, it has been quite successful. From what began as a movement of just a handful of people, you could count them using just your fingers and toes, Christianity has grown into one of the most prominent religions in all the world. Over 2 billion people, one-third of the earth claim Christianity as their religion, as their faith background. That is an unbelievable amount of evangelism that has transpired over the centuries. And it started with just a few folks in Palestine. However, the road of evangelism was not always rosy or inviting. Conversion was all too often a forced decision, changing faith under duress. Here is a short history of Evangelism, both good and bad. Its very short and crude, but you’ll get the idea.

At the beginning, evangelism took the form of street preaching and in the synagogues. Paul and Peter were the major evangelists, going from town to town sharing the story to all those who would listen. Sometimes the people would respond favorably, and sometimes they would respond violently. Our scripture this morning reflects both of those reactions respectively. The Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John can all be considered sermons, written by certain evangelists. The gospels share the faith, share the stories. Granted, they each share the stories in their own context, out of their own experience, but they try and share the faith with others. Otherwise, they wouldn't have written it down. The book of Acts is the story of how early Christianity grew. How the Apostles shared the faith, and at the end of the stories, we often read something like, "and many were added to their number that day." They found receptive people and they shared what their faith meant to them.

Because the church was growing in size and influence, the church was often looked upon with disdain and uneasiness. After a short while, persecution of the early church became a very real event. Christians killed just because they were Christian. Being fished to the lions, burned at the stake, crucifixions. This is the age of the martyrs. Those who died by the faith, for the faith, at the hands of those who didn't want the faith. Most often, those who were martyred did not want to be a martyr. It wasn't exactly their choice. However, some of those who were killed went to their death willingly, knowing that they were providing a witness to others and being faithful to Christ. Ignatius of Antioch was a leader of the ancient church and was arrested for being a Christian. All of the Roman Christian's eyes were upon his arrest and trial and death sentence. Ignatius was afraid that Christians in Rome might try to arrange for his escape, but he wrote ahead to them to ask them not to rescue them. Here is a portion of his letter:

"I am corresponding with all the churches and bidding them all to realize that I am voluntarily dying for God - if, that is, you do not interfere. I plead with you, do not do me an unseasonable kindness. Let me be fodder for wild beasts - that is how I can get to God. I am God's wheat and I am being ground by the teeth of wild beasts to make a pure loaf for Christ. I would rather that you be kind to the beasts so that they may be my tomb and no scrap of my body be left. . . What a thrill I shall have from the wild beasts that are ready for me! I hope they will make short work of me. I shall coax them on to eat me up at once and not to hold off, as sometimes happens. And if they are reluctant, I shall force them to it."

Maybe being a minister is not really a good thing at all. I can't imagine voluntarily dying for God. Nor are we going to ask for any volunteers from the congregation today. But the early martyrs saw their death as a form of witnessing to others. As a form of sharing with the population that the Christian faith is so important that it is worthy enough to die for.

As time went on, Christianity grew. Matter of fact, the Roman empire had to stop persecuting Christians because the Roman Emperor, Constantine, became a Christian in 313 A.D. Now, the persecutions went the other way. Drove of Roman citizens became Christian because it was advantageous to do so. It improved your status. Christianity became commonplace and ordinary. With people joining the church for less than true motives, those who wanted to make a statement about the strength of their own faith had to find another means. Most of them turned to monasticism - dying to companionship and comforts of the material world and became monks

who lived in the desert. They wanted their faith to mean something, and they couldn't find it in the new world order.

Probably one of the most sad and terrible ways in which Christians "took a stand" for what they believed in was through the crusades. All in all, the crusades lasted for two hundred years. Their goal was to gain land, reclaim Jerusalem, and conversion and evangelism. Each of the crusades failed in every one of these categories. The Christians fought against the Muslims and against the Jews, hoping to gain followers and land. There is no better way of showing the love of Christ by killing those who oppose you. Indeed, one of the great heroes of the Crusades was a Christian prince of Romania, Vlad Trepes, who's nation was on the boarder between the Christians and Muslims. The reigning Pope supported Vlad who protected Christian land from the infidels. As a defender of Christianity, Vlad Trepes, committed countless acts of barbarism and cruelty towards those who opposed him or Christian ideals. He killed thousands upon thousands of Muslims and other non-Christian groups. His most favorite way of killing his enemies was to have them impaled. At one execution, he had 20,000 Turkish captives impaled with long sticks in the ground to be discovered by an advancing army of Turks. The army turned around. Vlad Trepes became to be known as Vlad the Impaler. Today, we know him as the historical figure of Count Dracula - the defender of Christian ideals. Much evil has been done throughout history for these so-called Christian ideals. The crusades, the inquisition, Nazis were Christian - killing those who killed Christ, the KKK has Christianity as it's foundation.

When the new world was discovered by the Europeans, Christianity was used as a tool of subjectating and controlling the natives. Those who were converted had to follow the orders of the religious leaders. Those who were not converted were counted as enemies and disposed of any way possible.

Evangelism is not all bad news. In the 1700's the Great Awakening took place. This was a time period of spiritual renewal and an awareness of God in the lives of the people. Tent preaching, traveling preachers, the movement challenged people to find faithfulness in their daily lives and to seek God's kingdom here on earth. The Methodist movement was born out of the great awakening.

What I want to share with you this morning, is Evangelism is not a dirty word. Evangelism, at its core, is not something to shun away from nor should it be threatening. Evangelism is sharing the faith. Sharing the faith. Not in a forceful, demanding way, but to share your faith with your actions, your commitment, your faithfulness. If I were to ask you, what two things should you never talk about at the dinner table, I bet most of you would mention "politics and religion". That's fine. In our culture, we don't want to force our beliefs on anybody. What I want to teach you this morning, is how to evangelize in a non-threatening over-bearing way. Evangelism does not have to be an in-your-face enterprise. We can share our faith in more ways than street-corner preaching will reach very, very few. Hopefully, we are in the business of evangelizing. Hopefully, we want to share the importance of our faith with others. Share, not give. Evangelism is born out of a love between God and humanity. In our faith, we have the belief that God loves us and we try like the dickens to love God back. Out of that experience of God loving us and us loving God, we feel called and compelled to share that relationship with other people.

If something means a lot to you, don't you want to share that experience with others? If something is important to you, don't you seek others to share in that excitement? The poor evangelists are those who evangelize for the sake of evangelism, in order to get more people in Christianity. Something that they think that they need to do. The great evangelists are those who witness to the power and love of God, who share their story, and offer the invitation to join in that dynamic relationship. Not for evangelism's sake, but for love's sake. An evangelist should not give a 200 page dissertation on the correctness of Christian dogma and superior theological thought, but should witness to the love of God working in their lives.

A rich Dutch merchant was seeking to buy a diamond of a certain kind to add to his collection. A famous dealer in New York found such a stone and called him to come and see it. The merchant flew immediately to New York, where the seller had assigned his best diamond expert to close the transaction. After hearing the assistant describe in perfect technical detail the diamond's worth and beauty, the Dutchman decided not to buy it. Before he left, however, the owner of the store stepped forward and asked, "Do you mind if I show you that stone once more?" The customer agreed.

The store owner didn't repeat one thing that the salesman had said. He simply took the stone in his hand, stared at it, and described the beauty of the stone in a way that revealed why this stone stood out from all of the others he had seen in his life. The customer bought it immediately.

Tucking his new purchase into his breast pocket, the customer commented to the owner, "Sir, I wonder why you were able to sell me this stone when your salesman could not?"

The owner replied, "That salesman is the best in the business. He knows more about diamonds than anyone, including myself, and I pay him a large salary for his knowledge and expertise. But I would gladly pay him twice as much if I could put into him something I have which he lacks. You see, he knows diamonds, but I love them. He knows diamonds, but I love them."

If you love something, you will be that much more effective. If you love something, then you want to share that love with others. That is what evangelism is. Being compelled to share the love that is within us. Sharing the stories of scripture that means something to us. Inviting others to share in our experience of God.

Now, do you just walk next door, knock, and when they answer bombard them with literature and express your faith to a captive audience? No. So do this: "Don't apologize for your faith, but give an apology." "Don't apologize, give an apology." If that sounds confusing, let me clarify. When you apologize, we generally take it as a remorseful statement asking for forgiveness. We use it as a means of saying "I'm sorry". In today's lingo, "I apologize" is the same as saying "I'm sorry." Too often, it seems that we apologize for our faith. We go out of our way to hide our Christianness. If you pray at home before you eat, do you pray when you have guests, or give the blessing for the food when you eat out? If not, ask yourselves "why?". Is it that you don't want to offend anyone? Don't apologize for your faith. Let it show. Not as a badge or medal to show off, but because it is a part of who you are. When you are told of someone not doing so well or having a bad day, do you offer to pray for them? If not, ask

yourself, “why?”. Don’t apologize for your faith. If your spouse, family member, or another person is against your religious convictions, don’t apologize, but stand firm for what you believe to be known as right. Don’t compromise your spirituality because someone else takes offense. Don’t apologize. However, I will ask you to offer an apology. Offer an apology. The actual meaning of the word apology is simply a written or spoken defense. A written or spoken defense. If you give an apology, you are defending your actions, your beliefs, your convictions. If I am 4 hours late getting home, I would have to give an apology to Steph - that is, to defend my whereabouts for the last few hours. It does not necessarily mean remorse or sorrowful feelings, but that could be involved. If you are asked about your spiritual beliefs, give an apology - tell others why you believe what you believe, share with them about what your faith has done for you. Tell them why you belong to a church, what that community of faith has done for you. Invite receptive people to come to church, to share in the life that you experience. When was the last time that you invited someone to supper? How about on the golf course? How about shopping? When was the last time that you invited someone to church? Are you ashamed of your faith life? Share it to those who ask. Don’t apologize, but offer an apology. In our scripture this morning, Paul and Silas were practicing spiritual disciplines that they felt called to do. Singing and praying together. They were not hiding their faith. They were not apologizing for their beliefs. Did they go to the jailer and try to convince him of the rightness of Christianity? No. Did they corner him and pressure him to believe? No. It was the jailer, who noticed and paid attention to the fact that their faith was important, that their faith was meaningful, that their faith made a significant difference in their lives. It was the jailer who came forward and asked how he could join them, how he can have that same feeling of love and contentment, of finding something that is real, that he can hold on to and find the love of God that was missing from his life. And Paul and Silas offered up an apology.

Friends, so many people are searching just like that jailer. So many are lost, seeking for something real. Can they find it in you? Can they find it in us? We are called to share the love of Christ with everyone that we meet. At age twelve, Robert Louis Stevenson was looking out into the dark from his upstairs window watching a man light the street lamps. Stevenson’s governess came into the room and asked what he was doing. He replied, “I am watching a man cut holes in the darkness.” I see this as a marvelous picture of what our task should be as sharers of God’s light - people who are busy cutting holes in the spiritual darkness of our world. That is the essence of evangelism. Without apologizing for our faith, we are called to give an apology. When we do that, the faith that we keep locked up inside of us will tear down the walls of its prison, and the light that you share will cut holes in the darkness and emptiness of those who are seeking. If you still don’t feel comfortable with the word evangelism, please accept my sincerest apology...