

Wednesday, May 3, 2017 - Day 122 – I Kings 10-12, Psalm 101, Acts 16

Today reading from the Book of Acts tells the story of a miracle. But that miracle is not the earthquake. To be sure, it could easily be interpreted as an answer to Paul and Silas' prayers. After all, there they were- two men of G-D unjustly beaten and imprisoned because of their faith. Although it may have come in answer to their prayer, the miracle we should be concerned with is the jailer's conversion.

For all its power and awe, the earthquake plays only a bit part in this drama. The miracle comes as a result of their incredible faith. Although it defied all logic and sense of self-preservation these two men stayed when they could have easily escaped. For whatever reason, because they felt it was right or because they were inspired by G-D, they stayed. But far from dooming them to more prison time, Paul and Silas' seemingly foolish choice to stay in what was left of their cell produced a completely unexpected result.

Such demonstrations of faith can have a powerful effect on those who witness them. There is a tale out of medieval Japan that illustrates the real power of such a witness. There was once a monk who was walking through the woods on the way back to his monastery. Suddenly, he was ambushed by a group of bandits who surrounded him and demanded his money. The monk told them, I have no money, only my staff and my rosary. The bandits took him at his word and disgusted, left him and went on their way. But after walking on for a little while the monk suddenly remembered that he did indeed have a small purse of coins that had been given to him as an offering for the temple. He ran back down the path, caught up the bandits, held out the purse and apologized for having forgotten about it when they first held him up. The bandits were stunned. The moment they regained their senses they fell on their knees before the monk, shaved their heads and begged to become his disciples.

The monk had no reason to run after his attackers in order to give them his purse. It was no different for Paul and Silas. They had no reason to remain in the ruined jail. Their actions defy all logic and even our fundamental sense of what is right. So why did they do it? Simply put, because it is what Jesus would do. Jesus' first concern was never for himself, it was for the other, even when that other person was wronging him. Such divine love forgives its enemies, turns the other cheek and even prays for the wellbeing of those who persecute it. And as Jesus' followers, Paul and Silas understood that they were called to live their lives according to this love. As such, their first obligation was not to themselves, not to their own safety or comfort, but to the Gospel. This meant they were called to stand up for what they believed in and testify to their faith. Such commitment ultimately cost Paul his life. Even though the Roman government had no wish to force the issue, Paul's first duty was to stand up for this faith so that as many people as possible would learn about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But, and here is the most important part, he communicated that witness, not just with his words, but through his actions. And it was those actions, such as staying in his cell when he could have escaped, that truly transformed people's lives.

That is the power of faith. And when we truly embrace it we are then able to emulate Jesus and put the needs of others before our own and defy the iron clad logic of self-interest and self-preservation. When faith is that strong, when we are so committed to it that we would stay in our cell out of concern for our jailer, or willingly give money to those who would rob us, then it changes people's lives and even our world in a way that is nothing short of a miracle.

By The Rev. Kirk Berlenbach