

The St. John's Pulpit

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AND THE BRICK PILE SHOOK

Acts 16:25-34

High School Graduate Recognition Sunday, June 5, 2016
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A few months ago I was visiting a couple from our church. We were at the hospital and the man shared with me about a time when he was 18 years old. The year was 1945, and he was in the Army. He was stationed in Germany, at the conclusion of World War II. While there he was charged with managing 65 of Germany's SS troops. He was also charged to send back to the United States all the information he could gather about V2 rocket Germany used in the war. *I think he was taking a gap year before college – you know, travel around Europe, meet the people, and see the sites.* He actually did travel around Germany a fair amount during his time there, and one of the places that he went to was Mannheim. Since Mannheim was an important industrial center in Germany, the Allies bombed it frequently. Air raids during the war had almost completely destroyed the city. Pretty much all of the buildings in Mannheim were reduced to large piles of bricks. If people needed to meet or gather inside out of the weather they did so in the underground basements of the now non-existing buildings.

Yet it was in such a basement, converted into an auditorium, that our young American soldier heard his first opera. It was *Faust*, by Charles Gounod. The opera tells the tale of aging, learned, but despairing scholar who makes a deal with the devil. He trades his soul for youth, beauty, and a guarantee of romantic success with the lovely young maiden Marguerite. Yet, as the story unfolds and Marguerite becomes pregnant, she is abandoned by Faust, and is treated as a social outcast. She begins to show some moral fiber as the play evolves, and though she never really escapes her earthly reality, at the conclusion of the opera her soul ascends to heaven. The performance of such an opera in post-war Germany is ironic. The German people have now found out what it means to have been associated with someone who made a deal with the devil. Yet for our soldier, sitting underground, beneath a pile of rubble, the soul-searching vocals of Marguerite were the most beautiful singing he had ever heard. He said, "She sang underground in that basement auditorium. And the brick pile shook." That's when McLain Hall became a life-long fan of the opera. And after his "gap year" he did go on to attend and graduate from Furman University.

Our Biblical text for this morning starts out with Paul and Silas in prison. Paul, formerly the persecutor of Christians named Saul, and Silas are on a missionary journey to share the message and love of Christ. They have been put in prison, essentially for disturbing the peace. See, along the way they encountered a girl whose mind was disturbed; but she had the reputation of being a fortune teller, and made a lot of money for her owners because of this. One day Paul stopped his preaching to heal this girl's troubled mind. When the owners saw that she was now in her

right mind, they were upset. They were afraid that their means of making money through her had been taken away, and so they had Paul and Silas arrested. Essentially, they were arrested for disturbing the status quo. When someone is benefitting from the status quo, they call usually call it disturbing the peace.

Now while Paul and Silas are in prison, they are singing hymns to God in the middle of the night, when an earthquake strikes and shakes the foundations of the prison. The jailer wakes up, sees the destruction of the prison, and believes that all of the prisoners have escaped. And he, knowing what happens in the Roman Empire when a jailer lets his prisoners escape, draws his sword and prepares to kill himself. But Paul stops him; and assures him that all of the prisoners are still within. Now Paul might have believed that he and Silas would eventually be released – they were in fact released shortly – but it is still remarkable that he valued the life of the jailer over his immediate freedom. For the jailer, that was the moment when the brick pile shook. And that was when the jailer decided that he wanted to have a faith like Paul's. That was when he decided and his family decided to become a Christians.

Think for a moment about Paul's sacrifice. I can't imagine that he and Silas had some deep-seated fondness for the jailer. They had known him less than 24 hours. No, Paul had a deep-seated fondness for the message, love, and life of Christ. He had seen it first hand as a persecutor of Christians. He had guarded the coats of those who took them off to stone to death the Christian disciple Stephen. The disciple who in similar fashion to Jesus said, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" and then died. So Paul had seen Christ-like sacrifice and now he was doing it himself.

We are fortunate if we have had experiences where someone else has valued our soul and our well-being over their own self-interest. Yet that is the Jesus Paul taught and that is the way of Jesus. Love requires sacrifice. And learning to love requires a lifetime. We are always given new situations in which we are to learn how to love. We may choose these situations, not knowing all that they may entail, and sometimes they may choose us.

About ten years ago, a man from Benton Harbor, Michigan named Jameel McGee was accused of selling drugs and arrested. He would go on to serve four years in prison. The thing is, he did the time, but he didn't do the crime. Police officer Andrew Collins, just wanting to make a drug arrest, falsified the police report when he arrested Jameel. 4 years later, Officer Andrew Collins was eventually caught for falsifying multiple police reports, planting drugs, and stealing. He would spend a year and a half in prison himself. Well when you go to prison and then get out, you essentially find yourself at ground zero. As fate would have it, upon release both Jameel and Andrew would return to Benton Harbor, Michigan. And it just so happened that they both ended up at the same faith-based employment agency called Mosaic Café. They really had no choice to talk about what happened face to face. When they talked all Andrew could say was "I have no good explanation for what I did. All I can do is say that I am sorry."

When Jameel first went to prison he said "my only goal was to seek him (Andrew) when I got home, and to hurt him. That was my goal." But soon after going to prison he noticed the Bible

on the table. He picked it up and started reading it. As he began reading he said, “All these thoughts started coming into my head to just let stuff go. Just let it go. Move on. Be productive while you are here.” So when Jameel heard Andrew’s apology he said, “That was pretty much all I needed to hear.” Many people would have found it difficult to forgive someone who took four years of their life but Jameel did. Yet, in truth, the first time Jameel actually encountered Andrew after prison, it was not at Mosaic Café but out in the street when he was with his 5 year old son. Jameel looked at Andrew and said, “I want you to explain to my son, why I haven’t been with him his whole life.” The anger he thought he had let go of returned, but eventually Jameel’s faith and desire to be a positive and forgiving person won out, and he and Andrew are now good friends. They became friends as co-workers at Mosaic and shared with one another their thoughts about life. They then did activities together outside of work. And one day Jameel actually told Andrew that he loved him. And Andrew just started weeping and said, “You don’t owe me that. I don’t deserve that.” Later Jameel was asked, “Did you forgive Andrew for his sake or for yours?” His answer, “No, for our sake. Not just us, but for *our* sake.” His growing Christian faith and hope for a kinder, gentler humanity has led Jameel to go around with Andrew giving speeches at churches and other organizations about the importance of forgiveness and redemption.

Most likely. I hope not, you will not be put in prison but each us will be wronged and certainly feel wronged at various times throughout our lives. We can do our part in making the world a kinder, gentler place or not. Sometimes it can be hard to forgive, but we can choose to make forgiveness our home base rather than revenge or bitterness. We can seek to be someone who promotes fullness of life, rather than someone who promotes an eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth.

You never really know what life will ask you to bear. As many of you are aware, my mother passed on about five months ago due to cancer. Some of you may know a little bit her relationship to my mentally handicapped sister Beth. Mom would not have chosen to have had a mentally handicapped daughter, but in hindsight, I’m not sure she would have chosen any differently. Our family has been blessed by Beth’s gentle soul and sweet, trusting spirit. And through Beth my mom in was deepened as a person of faith. She learned both patience and perseverance. She learned to value life and worked for the fullest possible life for Beth. She maintained good rapport with the teachers at Beth’s school. She helped to establish a Sunday School class for the mentally handicapped at her church. She worked to help establish the Howell Center for the mentally handicapped so that Beth would have a place to continue to learn and grow once she finished school. And eventually mom worked to have Beth moved to a group less than two miles from the house. And every Saturday, she would bring Beth home for dinner, story-telling, a long bath, Sunday School the next morning, and lunch the next day Bojangle’s. Mom was involved with all of the programs that Beth participated in, but this was their special time together. In short, mom stepped up and faithfully responded to what life asked of her.

Beth can’t walk – she uses a wheelchair. Beth does not speak – she communicates mainly through gestures. And Beth is legally blind – when she was younger she could see a little but

now she can't see a cup on the table in front of her. But through her, mom learned to see the world through the eyes of the heart. Mom once shared a Denzel Washington quote on Facebook – “Why do we close our eyes when we pray, cry, kiss, or dream? Because the most beautiful things in life are not seen but felt by the heart.” She followed it with this personal comment – “Reminds me of our special Beth who only sees bright lights...most of her life now is feeling with the heart.”

On the morning of the last day my mom would speak, she said to me, “Bring Beth.” I called and Beth was brought to the house. Beth recognized the gravity of the moment and wore a concerned expression as I wheeled her back to see mom. When Beth heard mom's voice, she covered her eyes with her hands – her gesture to let you know she wants to be told a story. But mom didn't have the energy to tell her a story. So I read Beth some nursery rhymes and we all just hung out a little while. As I began to wheel Beth out to leave, mom said to Beth, “Bethie. I love you. I love you. I love you.” And to me she said, “Just love her.” When her earthly life was drawing to an end, she wanted fullness of life for others.

Those three words, “Just love her,” serve as a guidepost for me when interacting with Beth.

The first time I go to pick Beth up and take her out – (I'm thinking) “I wonder if she will even want to go out with me” – (I hear in my head) “Just love her.”

The first time I'm the one placing the order at Bojangle's – ‘I wonder if I'll order her the right thing’ – “Just love her.”

The first time she covers her eyes and wants me to tell her a story, as in one of two main stories mom told her and Beth knows by heart – “I wonder if she will get upset if I miss a part of the story” – “just love her.”

Well, I got the order wrong at Bojangle's, but manager knew it from her many visits there and fixed it. I did miss part of the story, but Beth moved her finger across her teeth, letting me know to say, “Bethie, now brush your teeth.” And when we got back to the group home driveway after eating, Beth shook her head “no” she didn't want to go back yet. So we rode around listening to Barry Manilow's Greatest Hits. Songs I knew she liked, since she stole that record from me as a child, and played it on her record player. As we rode around started with “Mandy” and continued riding until we “Made it Through the Rain.”

“Just love her.” Three words of life mom spoke on her deathbed. Her body was consumed with cancer...but the brick pile shook.

Will you be for life when it doesn't feel like life is for you? Will you be for love when it doesn't seem to serve any of your personal interests? Will you be for love and life or just for yourself? The part that is only you will break down, many times throughout the course of life and always at the end. Will you follow the way of Jesus? The one who kept the crowd from stoning the woman caught in adultery and offered her new life; the one who ate with the hated tax collector Zacchaeus and inspired him to give back all the extra money he had wrongly taken, and the one

who forgave his killers on the cross. We will all have our challenges, and we can simply try to get past them. Or we can say with Jesus, I am for love. I am for fullness of life; no matter what. That is the only kind of faith that can endure the tests of living.

It's been said that religion is about avoiding hell, and spirituality is for people who have already been there. But faith, as part of a faith community, is about cultivating habits that make you a more spiritual person, a person more reflective of the love of Christ. While the opera singer may have sung more beautifully in the underground auditorium that day, she had already spent years training her voice. Paul was self-sacrificing in that pivotal moment in the Jailer's life, but he and Silas were already on a mission to spread the message of Christ. Jameel was very gracious in forgiving Andrew, but he had already been reading the Bible and reflecting on his life. My mother gently called me to love Beth from her deathbed, but she had already spent a lifetime doing so. Will you follow the way of Jesus? The journey always begins now.