

22nd Sunday after Trinity 2024

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Preacher: Rev. Canon Howard Edwards

[0 : 00] So this picks up in Acts 16 at verse 35. But when it was day, so you have to remember what's happened here is the jailer has come to see Jesus in the Acts of Paul.

And in the morning, the magistrate sent to the police saying, let those men go. And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying the magistrates have sent to let you go.

Therefore, come out and go in peace. But Paul said to them, they have beaten us publicly, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens and have thrown us into prisons.

And do they now throw us out secretly? No, Paul said, let them come themselves and take us out. The police reported these words to the magistrate, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.

So they came and apologized to them, and they took them out and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia.

[1 : 11] And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. One of the sort of recurring dreams I think human beings have, one of them is ending up at work and somehow being dressed and still wearing your pajamas.

And the one of a preacher that moves from church to church, you're showing up and having prepared a sermon on a different text. So thank you for that. Will you pray with me as we turn to the word of God?

Holy God, as we come together remembering how you inspired and established this congregation and how you have provisioned them to fully embrace the commission into which they are baptized, we turn to your word.

Fill us with hope and the desire for you alone. Fill us with eager anticipation and excitement for every opportunity to speak your truth and to do your will.

Fill us with steadfast love for your people. Help us be steadfast in the work that you give us wherever you send us.

[2 : 22] You are the cornerstone of every Christian existence. Let our lives be built upon that sure foundation, inspiring us a yearning to hear and see and love and respond as people called by you.

And now as we turn to your word, let the words I speak and the meditations of all our hearts be of you and be acceptable to you, our Lord and our God.

Amen. It's a joy to be with you guys this morning. I just, I don't get a lot of opportunities to preach in the job that I do.

It's very much legal and bureaucratic and financial. So when I get a phone call from a fellow pastor and he says, will you come and preach?

It's like, okay, I'm on my way. And then he has to tell me it's a month from now. But I do thank you for this morning and just for the joy of being able to be with you, my sisters and brothers in Christ and share God's word.

[3 : 28] And Daniel mentioned that you are reading through the book of Acts. And so this morning's message is going to be centered on a question.

And that question is, what do you value? It's a significant question. And as we read the book of Acts, it's a fair question to ask, because in the Acts, we see what the early church valued.

And we see what they endured and suffered because of what they valued. Considering what you value is important, because what you value motivates you.

It drives your choices. It drives your behaviors. It's what you apply the time that God gives you in this life toward. It's what you use the biological and financial and physical resources that God entrusted to your care for.

What you value most captivates you. Jesus told us what we value and what we do and what we seek to acquire paints a picture of who we are.

[4 : 40] It reveals what we worship. And as we read through the Acts, it's significant to note what the church clearly identifies as their highest priority, their greatest value.

And we might note how that was evident in their Acts. Acts are significant. They are important in the book of Acts.

Jesus warns us, some of us will be pretenders. Some of us will claim to believe. Some of us will call out to him, Lord, Lord, cloaked in a Christ-likeness.

But when it comes right down to it, when push comes to shove, he tells us that far too many, even most of us, though claiming to be of Christ, will value the ways, the ideals, the ambitions of the world above Jesus.

It will be evident, he told us, in our Acts. Among Jesus' followers, I believe, is more than a mere statement.

[5 : 53] It is a way of life that is obvious to everyone around them. The Acts, the fruits, the outcomes of their Christian lives will leave no doubt of their Christian belief.

No doubt about what, or more precisely, who they value. And you know, as much as we might try to say otherwise, our belief is actually revealed in actions driven by our choices and motivated by what we truly value.

We bear witness of this truth as we read through the book of Acts. You see, in those early days, Jesus and his church were an outrage, a ridiculous religious parody, a heresy, a scandalous contradiction of Roman interest and Roman values.

In Rome, Jesus' followers were ridiculed. There's a bit of graffiti. You can find it on the internet. And it's graffiti that is mocking a man called Alexa Menos, a Christian worshipping his crucified God, which is depicted as a donkey.

Then and now, life was hard. It was expensive to just get by. Raising a family was demanding. Building a home was tough.

[7 : 22] Eking out a living was grueling. Making ends meet was a challenge. Life could be dangerous. And you know, it was heartbreaking.

Cultural rejection, political marginalization, social persecution, and economic exclusion are not just recent phenomenon faced by Christians.

these persecutions have endured, have been endured by the church from its very beginning. And in the face of all this, Jesus doesn't just say, hey, keep your head down.

Take care of yourself. Do what you can. Look out for you and yours. Seek your fortune. Make your name. Instead, he says, you will love the Lord your God and you will love others.

You will serve them and even suffer and die for them. You will put their needs and their well-being ahead of you and your own.

[8 : 26] And you will care for their eternal life. Why? Because you love the Lord your God and you know God's love for others and his eternal value of them.

And when you love, your belief in God is obvious because you value what God values and the acts of your life will reveal that truth.

Thy will be done. We pray it. We pray it every week. The word will is a broad word. It's a big word. It's expansive. We are praying that what God values and desires about anything will be fulfilled and scripture is clear.

What God desires is the restoration of his people to himself in that beautiful free relationship he created and chose for himself and his people.

A relationship we call love. So in Acts, we encounter a conflict. A conflict between value systems.

[9 : 38] Between lives lived, inspired, and ordered by biblical divine love and lives centered on the preservation of self, the elevation of self, the idolatry of self, the worship of self, what the Romans called dignitas.

In Roman society, the word dignitas characterized the highest ideal of life, the very object and objective of life.

Dignitas, valued authority and wealth accumulation and physical power and influence and self-reliance and prestige and charisma. It was about commanding dominance and demanding respect, being admired and imposing your will.

But Jesus said, it's simply not that way among my followers. it won't be that way among you. So this Jesus, this Jesus who shunned, being made a king, who spurned comfort and luxury and treasure, who gave up self and home and family, who prayed, let thy will, not my will, be done, who would not make long prayers and sacrifices for himself and his own benefit, but instead sacrificed himself so that others might come to know God and to love God.

That Jesus, then, as he is so often now, was an absurdity, a caricature, an utter failure, a delusion, a donkey, crucified on a Roman cross.

[11 : 22] Today, in Acts, we read of the first few days when this Christian way, the Christian gospel, had reached Philippi, a city on the very doorstep of what is today modern Europe.

Philippi was a capital city, a center of Roman culture, of Roman commerce, of Roman influence, of Roman government, a center of worldly pride, and of Roman dignitas.

When Julius Caesar was assassinated, his adopted son, Octavian, defeated the armies of the assassins at Philippi, initiating the golden age of the Roman Empire.

He conquered, he became Caesar Augustus at Philippi. Philippi was a monument to his dignitas, a dignitas forged by his iron fist and maintained by the fear of Rome.

Much, Octavian said, could be accomplished under him. Build your name, seek your fortune, establish your family dynasty, but pay your tax and offer your tribute and worship Caesar Augustus or else.

[12 : 48] In the shadow of Caesar Augustus, you could claim your own muted form of dignitas. What we read in Acts this morning was the arrival of the Evangelical Church in Philippi.

Not great armies, not big enterprises, nor an elegant emissaries, but four guys. four travel-wearied guys wandering along a riverbank encountering a small group of women.

And one of these guys, Paul, had been hopping from city to city in recent times. In Damascus, his own people, the Jews, had plotted to kill him because of the chaos he had caused by all his wild Jesus talk.

You know, Paul was once an up-and-coming leader, an admired scholar, a respected citizen, a defender of the Jewish faith. But now, Paul was a despised idolater, and worse, worse, he was a Christian.

He lost everything because of this Jesus, and he was now trying to convince us of how much he'd gained. On Cyprus, he had confronted a mystical cult of a man called Elimus.

[14 : 11] At the mention of Jesus' name, that Elimus was blinded. His physical reality brought into alignment with his spiritual darkness. The proconsul there had converted.

His eyes were opened and stepped into the light. Love God. Love each other. Seek first the kingdom of God. Don't store up for yourself resting treasures.

Use the resources that God has entrusted for you for God's glory, not for your own personal dignitas. And you know what?

Even as I say these words, I feel the anxiety. There has to be another way. Surely, our modern Canadian dignitas and divine love can somehow coexist.

But that anxiety that I feel and that I know many feel begs the question, what do you value? Honestly, what do we value?

[15 : 09] And you know, God sees into our hearts. He knows the answer. He knows what drives us. He won't be deceived. He knows the struggle between love and dignitas.

He knows how it will play out in you and among us. You know the unbelievers? The unbelievers will have all the toys and trinkets and trappings of prosperity.

They'll have all the bells and whistles of a good life. The big house, the condo, the cottage, the best tech, the car, the boat, whatever else. Because that's what they value.

That's what they chase. But the Christian asks, what motivates me? What drives me? What do I truly value?

The early Christians faced the same realities as we do. And they faced the same implications of belief and worse. They faced the iron fist of Rome.

[16 : 06] In Acts, these are the Christians that we meet. In Antioch, Paul had caused a near riot as the whole city heard him speak.

And when their golden ambitions were threatened, the influential women and the men of Antioch rose up and chased that Paul and his Jesus out of town. In Iconium, again, Jews and Gentiles heard the truth.

And yes, some came to believe. But again, disputes and divisions and conflicts arose as this Jesus movement challenged their status quo. And again, Paul ran for his life.

But now, I imagine, Paul was beginning to wrestle with the question, why exactly am I running? What do I fear? What do I believe?

What do I value? The idols of self-preservation. Is that what I'm clinging to? See, Paul was just a guy. He was just a person like us, flesh and blood.

[17:13] He had nothing. He gave up career and business and academia and prestige and family. He was on the run. Did he have moments when he pled with God?

Surely, God, after all I have done, I deserve better than this. At Lystra, Paul resisted the paganization of the gospel. It was a religious commercialism of sorts, a prosperity gospel that would just fold Christianity into a vibrant local culture, just another ethic to sample in pursuit of dignitas. When Paul adamantly opposed this and more intensely and precisely declared the gospel again. Again, the religious and secular leaders twisted the Christian claims of a unique, exclusive truth into an offense against the tolerant social fabric of Lystra.

And again, people were incensed. They forced him outside the city, stoned him, and left him for dead. You can hear the echoes of Christ's word.

I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name. And you cannot serve two masters. Who do you serve? What motivates you?

[18:35] What do you value? Persecution takes many forms, from marginalization to murder, from economic oppression to criminal incarceration. I wonder how many of us, for the sake of peace at home or work or school or in the community, to avoid rocking the boat and the consequences of following Jesus openly, just kind of quietly go along to get along.

Religion, we convince ourselves, is a private matter. I have a personal faith. I have a personal savior. I am saved. It is well with me. But that's not really the gospel, is it?

It's all true. But it's not the way, it's not the work that we're called into. In a way, it is a modern dignitas. Standing firm and standing up is not easy.

It's costly. It's the way every Christ follower is called to. Paul was dragged outside of Lystra and he was left for dead.

So you know, he returned to Antioch and he just decided that enough was enough. He needed to look after himself. He needed to heal his body and soul. He needed to build a home and a plan for his old age.

[19:56] Surely he reasoned that's what God desires for me. It's his goodness. It's his blessing on me. And all of that that I just said was nonsense. Total nonsense.

Of course Paul didn't think any of that. He was a Christian. He and those who had been with him gathered the church together. They declared all that God had done with them and how God had used them and opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

I can imagine them saying, you know, they practically killed me. But you see them over there? You see those folks? They were pagan Gentiles.

But now, they're pagan no more. They loved God. And the church prepared for the next mission into hostile territory, a mission that would lead to Philippi.

So, as we read, Paul, Silas, and Timothy have approached a small group of women praying by a river and as they spoke, God moved in the heart of Lydia and she sees and she believes in the Christ that Paul and his team are speaking of.

[21:06] And that's how God has chosen to work through his people speaking. Paul was doing what Christ Jesus asks of every single one of his faithful followers.

He was doing what Jesus asks of you. What Jesus commissioned his church, that's you, to do.

What Jesus planted this congregation, again, that's you, to do.

Every single day of your life offers multiple opportunities to share the gospel, to celebrate Jesus, to talk about him, and so to respond to the commission that he has given each of you.

The commission you stepped into on your baptism to go and make disciples of Jesus, immersing them in the knowledge of who God is, and to go and speak, to tell them about Jesus.

When Paul spoke, God opened the eyes of Lydia's heart and she saw and received Jesus. She and the whole household entrusted to her care came to faith in Jesus.

[22:22] Wayne Gretzky, how's that for transition? Wayne Gretzky once said, he missed every single shot that he failed to take. And every time we fail to speak, when we are given a God-given

opportunity, we miss the mark.

We miss the opportunity that God gave us to reveal him and to watch him work. Paul spoke, God moved in the heart of Lydia, and you know, this was no small thing.

Lydia was a business person, and her product was extremely expensive, so her clientele would be among the mega-rich, the social elites.

Lydia would have been the equivalent of a modern-day Paris or New York fashion designer, mixing with the rich and the famous, mingling with the latest sensual cults in the temple spas, moving among celebrations of human ecstasy in the shrines where the bounds of respectable depravity were pushed.

That's where she plied her purple. And you can imagine the gossip that week after her conversion, you know, the prestigious purveyor of purple passes on the feast of Dionysus, house of purple awash in Christian red.

[23 : 42] You can hear her associates, girl, girl, what are you doing? What are you doing hanging out with those Christians? Don't get caught up in their nets. We might like to imagine that Lydia just carried on business as usual.

We like to believe the things that we wish were true, but you know, it's simply not possible. In Christ, Lydia was no longer of Caesar.

As she entered the river and was baptized, she crossed her own Rubicon. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot worship two gods.

her life would change. Paul sees the burden building. It all happened so fast in the twinkling of an eye. And so in his compassion, it seems that he's trying to give Lydia a little bit of space.

But Lydia, her heart open to Jesus is having none of it. It's almost like she prevails on them and says, you know, we're in this together. She opens her home and her heart to them.

[24 : 47] because belief in Jesus Christ looks like something. It looks fearless. It stands in the light. It's generous. It's compassionate.

It's self-expending. It's selfless. It goes into the public square. It goes into the marketplace. It goes into the halls of justice and into the houses of government.

And it does not ever hide in the shadow, nor is it reserved for merely private moments. being Christian looks like Jesus, steadfast in the face of any cost or any persecution.

Today, we see something of Jesus in Lydia. So next, Paul and his group hanging out in Philippi and they're being heckled by this slave girl.

And you know how it goes. The stain of Lydia's conversion is spreading through the town and the hucksters. You know, they seek to capitalize. You worship the most high God, a slave girl, mocks Paul and his friends.

[25 : 54] Acts tells us this girl had a spirit or a nature. In Greek, it says, of python, of a snake, of a deceiver, of a purveyor of divination.

She wraps you in her coil, she squeezes you for all your worth, and she destroys you. But notice this, this supposed prophetess says nothing mysterious or particularly unknown.

Lydia's story was surely rattling through the gossip chains of the city, and Paul's mission was no secret. But the girl had a reputation, so through her voice, mere statements of truth take on some kind of sinister tone of divination.

question. Why? Why do we so easily give ourselves over to the deceit and nonsense of the occult? And look at All Hallows' Eve, look how it's been appropriated by secular culture, a precious Christian time, now deeply and darkly overshadowed.

There's nothing like a public accusation and a titillating conflict to promote a psychic fraud. You think your Jesus is the only way to heaven, you think your Jesus is the only truth, so you think he's right and everyone else is wrong, your way is the only way, what makes you so sure of yourself?

[27 : 16] What makes you so privileged? Her supposed prognostications had made this slave girl's owners a ton of cash. So when Paul had finally had enough, he spoke the name of Jesus at which darkness must flee, at which evil and deceit must flee and in Jesus' name he commanded it to just stop and get lost.

And immediately the slave girl's income generating potential evaporated. How many claim Christ as king just so long as he can share the reign over their lives with cash?

And you know cash is alluring. It's an alluring king who has long ruled over the human heart. And the moment this Jesus disrupts the marketplace, that's when he's gone too far.

First Lydia, now the girl. This Jesus must go. Paul and his friends must be made an example of. The lies are concocted, the prosecutions are fabricated, the Roman lictors, the local judges who exact punishment were all too happy to wield their rods, the symbols of their office, to bloody these Christians and to beat this Jesus nonsense out of them.

And note how Paul responds. Does he renounce his faith? No. Does he capitulate and plead with these secular authorities for leniency? Does he complain to God about the injustice of it all?

[28 : 51] Surely God I deserve better? Isn't that what you promised? Does he cry out for God's wrath to rain down upon his abusers? No. Just the opposite.

He absorbs the loss. He tolerates the intolerance. He sings through suffering. He praises through pain and he prays for his persecutors and his prison guards.

He trusts God with his trauma. And again, God acts. He breaks their bonds and bursts their prison wide open.

Paul sees the opportunity, not his freedom, but the chance to see that jailer freed. You see, suddenly everything has flipped.

It's the jailer who's threatened and traumatized. Surely his prisoners have escaped and now he's the one in fear of Roman justice. He'd rather kill himself than face what Paul had just endured at his hands.

[29 : 53] But that ridiculous Christian, that Paul, and those prisoners immersed in prayers and surrounded by the praises of God, they honored God by living love in an abundance of integrity and compassion and generosity even for this abusive jailer.

They don't just seek their personal freedom in the darkness through those open doors. Most every criminal would run given such a chance, but not those Christians.

He stood firmly, integrity, compassion, love. We're all here, he said. Impossible. Impossible. Yet, the jailer saw him.

There he stood. What else would Paul do? God moved in the jailer. The encrusted stone and the iron chains that had held the jailer's heart captive were burst.

The door of grace flung open and that jailer stepped into the light. And again, we see the wondrous response to love. We see repentance.

[31 : 03] We see restoration. We see compassion and generosity. In Paul and in this ridiculous, awesome way of the cross, that jailer met Jesus.

Paul would later write its foolishness to the Greeks, but its wisdom given by God for his kingdom's advancement and for gospel growth.

The man was changed and like Lydia, his whole house was opened and there was an abundance of compassion, an expression of Christian love.

Enemies became brothers and through it all, another family came to know Jesus. The jailer had asked, what must I do to be saved?

The answer, believe. And believe in a way that is seen in the way you live. Live a belief that is seen in your acts.

[32 : 03] His belief too looked like something. It looked like Jesus steadfast even in the face of dire consequences. Without this jailer's sacrifice and homage to Caesar Augustus, this jailer would simply not be tolerated.

His life would be at risk, his family would be upended. Sacrifices and worship of Caesar Augustus were required of him as a Roman official.

They were a condition of his employment. We are not told how he fared, but to imagine he lived somehow consequence free. No member of the early church, knowing Rome as they did, would make that mistake.

This conversion would be a marvel of surrender and sacrifice and a mighty testimony to the gospel. So finally, note what happens when those Roman lictors are confronted by the truth.

In fear, they offer a quiet appeasement. Just let them go. Let them go. Get them out of here. But then there's that Paul again, that Christian.

[33 : 19] No way, he says. He claims the public square. You condemned me in public. Now admit your grievous error in public. You've seen the hand of the Most High God, to whom even Octavian Caesar Augustus will bend his knee.

So now let everyone bear witness of the acts of this one true God. Bear witness of his truth, his gospel, and the way of his Christ.

Bear witness of him who vibrantly inspired Lydia, who silenced the Satan in the slave girl, who captivated the jailer, and who set his followers free.

Paul had suffered as a Christian, celebrating, praising, praying, and singing to God. God. And now he stood in the public square, in the marketplace, in the face of government and Roman justice, and in the dungeon doing exactly what Christ Jesus had asked of him, and what he asks of each of us. He believed. He valued God. He loved God. And it was obvious, and it shaped his acts. In believing, Lydia and that jailer valued Christ, and it shaped their acts.

[34 : 42] In Philippi, God changed hearts and restored people to eternal life. Homes and families were changed. A church was planted.

Years later, Paul would write that church, and he would tell them of his ministry in Rome, his mission to the imperial guard.

He would write of his imprisonment and his evangelism of a whole new group of abusers, liars, persecutors, prosecutors, and jailers.

And I can't help but wonder, as the Philippians read that letter that he had written to them from a Roman prisoner, what they would remember as they read, describing how he again was suffering in a jail.

and still he was advancing the gospel. You are partakers with me of grace, Paul wrote, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.

[35 : 46] It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment so that you may approve what is excellent and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

Today, as you remember your first three years of ministry together as a congregation in this capital of Canada, let Paul's prayer to that church planted in Philippi, a capital, a leading city of another nation, be my prayer for each of you and all of you.

My hope is you will be the church boldly standing in the public square, fearlessly standing in the marketplace, leaving no doubt in the halls of justice and the houses of government that Christ alone is your king and that you will serve him with everything entrusted to you from the breath you just took to the home you inhabit to the abilities and education and bodies and you use to produce incomes to the resources placed in your hands to the very lives he invested in you to the spirit that he breathed into you.

I pray you will love him with your whole heart, that you will value him above all and so be his church. Will you pray with me? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Holy God, it is all about you.

[37 : 31] You are the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. For those who believe, you are the center of every hope, of every dream, of every ambition, of every motivation.

Give us eyes that seek only you. Give us ears that strain to hear your truth. Give us hearts, hearts that desire only you, hearts that value you.

give us a voice that speaks courageously let us be as steadfast as Jesus Christ was steadfast even in the face of trials persecution death on a cross let your love abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment among your people gathered here today give them the mindset of Christ so that they may approve what is excellent in your eyes and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through the knowledge and love of Jesus God the Son our only true Lord our only King to the glory and praise of you we live in Christ alone Amen