

Calvary United Methodist Church
October 28, 2018

OUR MISSION
Rev. Dr. Robert Cook

Children's Message:

If they would come forward, I would love to spend a little time with our kids. You are the most important kid here. How does that feel? Pretty good? Well, I do read the Bible. Big kids are welcome, there's a couple more. I like it. This is good! Hi, girls! And you are an important kid too.

So, anyway, I like to read the Bible so I can understand more about Jesus. I mean, he is the central figure in this whole enterprise we call church. And what he does is he changes the way that I look at the world. I always look at the world well, selfishly, that's it about me. When I read the Bible, it isn't. So there is a story I'll read later on and it's about a guy named Bartimaeus. Bar means son of and Timaeus is his father's name that they call him Son of Timaeus, but actually he was blind so they called him Blind Barti. And no one really cared about him. I mean some people were kind to him but a lot of people just didn't even see him, didn't care, he was just a beggar by the side of the road and he couldn't work, didn't have sheltered workshops, didn't have anything like that. And so every day he made his way out there and he held his hand out and didn't have any vision, just held his hand out. People put a coin in it. He'd say thank you and, you know.

Well, he heard that Jesus was coming and he heard that Jesus was an amazing healer. And he thought if I could just see Jesus, if I could just meet him, I'd have my sight. Well, when Jesus was coming, big crowds gathered around and no one would let him in, plus, I mean if you are blind it is really hard to see where you are going and people pushed him away. Finally he had no choice, he started crying out "Jesus! Jesus!" and, well, people said, "Shut up. Leave the guy alone. Just shut up." And he couldn't stop himself. He had to see Jesus. But Jesus heard and he said, "What can I do for you?" He said, "I want to see." He said, "Come here." He looked at him. He didn't touch him, didn't do anything, he just said, "Go your way. Your faith has made you all." And just like that, he could see. It was amazing, just amazing.

Now, I probably would have been a guy in the crowd that passed that guy back and think well, what a poor guy, you know, a pity and all that other stuff. But Jesus really helped him, so he changes the way that I look at the world and so that I can look at the world differently.

So, how do you look at the world differently? Well, let me show you. Can you get a little closer? We are going to make George Washington smile. Did you ever see a picture of George Washington? Did you ever see a big toothy grin on him? No, actually if you go to his place in Mount Vernon they will have a set of his teeth. He didn't really have great teeth. There is a reason for that, but he didn't have great teeth, didn't have those clear choice ads that they have

on, didn't have them. So he doesn't smile much. So I have a picture of George here, oh, wait, I have it here too. How do we do that, right? Here it is this way, there it is that way. But let me take the dollar bill out. Do you see George smile? Ok. Well, there is a little way of doing this that you can see that he smiles, alright? So, if you look at it that way, does he have a smile? He doesn't? Like that? Well, this is a total bust, isn't it? I came up here for fruit snacks and nothing else, Bob. Does that look like a smile? No? I am going to try this side. Do you see a little smile there? Not that way, but maybe that way. (Kind of.) Kind of. Stick it in the offering. Come up with another kid's sermon later on. What makes George Washington smile? Well, you know George actually followed Jesus too. He read his Bible. He had made a profession of faith. He believed in the love of God in Christ and that was really important to him, so he always did the right thing. That was what he said and, you know, he followed Jesus.

If you do that it will make you smile, even if the dollar bill won't. Now, I bet if I gave you the dollar bill you would smile, right? Come back after the next service.

Let's pray: Lord, teach us how to follow you so that we can look at our world differently. Thanks for our kids, big and small. Amen.

Message:

Acts 16:16-32

Would you join me in prayer? Lord help us to hear from you today. Speak deeply to our hearts that we may see differently after this service. So much going on in our world that breaks our hearts. This morning renew us in your grace, give us the determination to see the world through your eyes and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen

Well, I know that today is stewardship Sunday and later on Susie Shepler will come and she'll ask you to turn in your pledge for the year. And that's good. Now, stewardship, support of the church, is actually not the focus of today. The focus is not what does it cost to maintain a church. The real question is what does it cost to follow Jesus?

So, in the book of Acts, Kay read it well, we heard from how Paul and Silas making their way from Jerusalem doing the work of evangelism were frustrated. Things weren't going so well. That's when they were prompted by the Spirit to cross over in to Europe. They went into Greece, making their way to Philippi. There they went to a river and it was the Jewish custom to go to the river side and to meet people who also were called God-fearers, gentiles who followed the Jewish way or if there was no Synagogue there then that's where people would meet to pray. So, Paul and Silas go to the river on the Sabbath and they meet a group of people, God-fearers, people admiring the Jewish way about God and there they began to pray with them and get into a conversation about Jesus. And soon they had the first converts of the European mission and this was just amazing because it was going to open up not just Greece and not just Europe, but much of the world.

And Lydia, a brand new Christian that day, says to Paul and Silas, "If you find me faithful as a

believer, then come and stay in my house and make this a place for you to do your work.” So they began to go where the people were, preaching in the marketplaces especially, going to the shops, the cafes, the city centers. On the Sabbath they would gather at the river. One day by the river side a slave girl with a spirit of divination accosted them. She possessed what back then was called a python spirit by which she could tell fortunes or cast an evil eye on people. And people were scared to death of her. She made a lot of money for her slave masters, basically her pimps. And the woman annoyed Paul, mocking, calling attention to him in public and this went on for some time. Finally Paul got fed up with the whole thing. He looked her straight in the eye, something no one dared to do to a woman with a python spirit and he cast the spirit out in the name of Jesus, because since the cross, evil is not in charge, God is in charge. And the look in her eyes went from this evil thing to blank to finally her own mind returning to her, set free from this wretchedness that had bound her for so many years.

This took place where everyone could see it, but to her pimps now, she was useless. There is no profit in her. And it's sad that some people can only see human beings in terms of profit and loss, what they can get. And their anger boiled over. They were indignant and they were in an environment that could be highly charged there in the market place. So they started a riot. Paul and Silas get dragged to the city center. They are beaten, they are subjected to severe caning by the authorities and thrown into jail for sedition, placed in stocks and chains. So this is where all that preaching had taken them. Thanks a lot, right?

Try to imagine the scene: deep in the midst of this jail cell, in the darkness, dank smells, miserable. Open wounds on their backs and legs, having nothing to eat, no medical attention. What do they do? They share the scriptures they remember, which were many. Began to sing hymns. Is this crazy or what? And the prisoners are listening. But look, people are always listening to us to see if we have anything to say or nothing to say. If we don't know the word, we have nothing to say. And despite the treatment they received and the wounds that they bore and the pain that they had, here they are singing hymns at midnight and no doubt the jailer listened in too. People will listen in when we actually have something to say or to sing.

And then suddenly there is an earthquake, this rumble from deep within the earth and the chains feel off and the doors of the jail opened and no one moved. Now the jailer supposed that everybody had fled and if they had it was the rule: if a prisoner escaped, you do their time. Well, there was no way he could do that much time, they will kill him. So thinking everyone escaped, he drew his sword and was about to fall on it. Somehow Paul saw it in the dimness and he said, “Do yourself no harm. We are all here.” The silence, then a deep cry from the jailer: “What do I have to do to possess what you have? What must I do to be saved?” And Paul said, “Believe, believe in the Lord, Jesus Christ. You will be saved. You and your household.”

This is an awesome turn of events, a great story. Now, what did it cost Paul and Silas to follow Jesus? Well, they had given up their former lives to follow him. They had given up their self-reliance to trust in his leading. They had taken upon themselves to care for others, people they

normally would not have cared for or even looked at, especially those for whom no one cared, like Bartimaeus. They put themselves out there at risk to share the most important, most life changing message of all. So, if you want to ask the cost, what did it cost them, it cost them everything.

Now, the truth is, everything you and I hold in our hands will turn to dust. We have some antiques at home, you probably do too. It's a polite word of saying dead people's things. Some of them I cherish. What stands the test of time? What will actually last?

For many years I've thought deeply about this quote from Elizabeth Elliott, it was from her husband, Jim Elliott. He was a young man, 28 years old, went with a group of people down to South America, to Brazil to try to preach to the Waorani people and they killed him. She found his diary and in his diary when he was still a college student, he wrote this:

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.

So what did it cost you to go to church today? Not much. You got up a bit early, put a couple of bucks in the offering plate later. Might go out with your spouse or some friends, have brunch, have lunch, you know. Maybe you'll serve on a committee, it's that time of year. We are sending out letters to you. What's the cost? Not much. Not much.

But what does it cost to follow Jesus? That's a different matter. It costs first of all a change of heart and mind. If you follow Jesus, you are going to have to deal with your attitudes. You are going to have to deal with your prejudices, with your small and petty concerns to become a bigger person because God has that in mind for you. That cost means you really have to give up care for others. I know that we are overwhelmed by the amount of human need and tragedy. This morning as I sat about 6:30 with a cup of coffee, my heart was just heavy for the violence in Pittsburgh, some crazy guy sending out package bombs, for a man who tried to get into an African American church in Kentucky and couldn't so he went out and he shot two black people in a store. Man, what's really going on in this beautiful, amazing, wonderful country of ours? And we would turn away because it would just be easier not to think about it, go to something else, read the sports page, you know, go on line, watch a movie, do something else, play a video game. Only Jesus can care for everyone, but he asks us to care for someone. He asks us to give a care; he asks us to give our hands, that's part of the cost.

Learning to trust Jesus is also a part of the cost. There was nothing pretty about a jail cell. What Paul and Silas brought to that cell, chains and stocks and all, was their trust, which is why they could sing and give thanks to Jesus, that whatever may come, he was with them and that's what mattered most to them. And despite a flogging and a beating and trumped up charges, here these guys could still sing at midnight.

Now, you are not likely to ever be arrested for your faith, beaten, jailed, but still we are asked to trust in the leading of Jesus wherever he sends us. Paul and Silas knew the voice of Jesus.

His voice spoke the comfort that they needed. He too knew the beatings, he too knew the torture, he too knew the jail cell. He knew the cross, he went there trusting God's leading. So he does not excuse us for going to some hard places in life, but he's with us through all of those places and he says, "I am with you always." So we learn to trust him. That's part of the cost: giving up trusting ourselves.

And then walking with him. You know, it's no hardship to walk with someone you love, not at all. Nurturing our relationships only increases the love and the closeness of heart and mind and soul, more important than anything you can hold in your hands. Jesus is closer to you than the beating of your own heart. Think about it, closer than the air in your lungs right now. So as you walk with him and learn from him all the relationships of this life, of your life, grow in love. Even if you are the only person who is loving. And you hold steady because he is always working for reconciliation. That is the ultimate goal, to reconcile the whole world. God knows when that will happen, not in my lifetime or yours most likely but in God's time, yes, so we walk with him.

And part of the cost is going where he sends us. He is unlimited except by the limits we place on him. Now, if you are open, wherever he sends you is the right place. It's the right place for me, I trust him. It's good. I'm happy. I'm doing what he is calling me to do. I am learning lots of people. I'm getting to know them and bless you and bless you again. I know April; she has a nice voice, I just listened. It's a joy.

There is always a grace. There is always something to learn. There is always a blessing when you respond. It might be going to Bethesda Mission. It might be going to Calvary Cupboard. It might be coming in on your hands and knees and cleaning up some mess. It might be going on a mission trip, whether to Florida now or North Carolina or Africa, Jeff is going, when are you going, in January, huh? Part of that price is to pray for those who go. If you are open to receive it, you receive the blessing.

Now, think about Paul and Silas going to Macedonia. They were frustrated in the Middle East. The doors were closing. And suddenly a new direction for the Gospel opens up and people come to know the love of God that sets them free. And yet they experience a mob attack, a flogging, a wrong imprisonment and they can still sing to the glory of God which is when that quake opened these doors that they never expected and the doors opened a continent and a world to the love of God in Christ.

So, your mission, my mission, our mission, the mission, is to open the doors of grace for people around us. The attractional model of church we just say come and sit with us doesn't work anymore. When Jesus said, "Go and I am with you," that works. And opening up the doors of God's grace for someone means seeing the beauty and the sacredness and the worth of another human being's life as we see the sacredness and the beauty of our own life and the worth of our life, a love of God and neighbor and self. This is the stuff that sets people free. This is the stuff that opens doors to new life and to new hope and that's why we are a church. That's why

we are here today. That's why we sacrifice, that's why we pledge. That's why we tithe. That's why we'll work or volunteer or serve. And what happened in Pittsburgh and in Kentucky this week and in 14 packages that were sent is why we are a church: because we stand up and we say what's right from what's wrong. And we work and give our hearts and lives to Christ that we may make a difference. That's why we are a church. And it's why those before us were a church who did their part for us; it's why it is our turn now for our families and our communities, for the future, for the world that God so loves, because it is the only thing in this world and the next that lasts. Everything else turns to dust. Amen.