

¹⁶ One day, when we were on the way to the place for prayer, we met a slave woman. She had a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She made a lot of money for her owners through fortune-telling.

¹⁷ She began following Paul and us, shouting, “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!”

¹⁸ She did this for many days.

This annoyed Paul so much that he finally turned and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!” It left her at that very moment.

¹⁹ Her owners realized that their hope for making money was gone. They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the officials in the city center. ²⁰ When her owners approached the legal authorities, they said, “These people are causing an uproar in our city. They are Jews ²¹ who promote customs that we Romans can’t accept or practice.”

²² The crowd joined in the attacks against Paul and Silas, so the authorities ordered that they be stripped of their clothes and beaten with a rod.

²³ When Paul and Silas had been severely beaten, the authorities threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to secure them with great care.

²⁴ When he received these instructions, he threw them into the innermost cell and secured their feet in stocks.

²⁵ Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

²⁶ All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison’s foundations. The doors flew open and everyone’s chains came loose.

²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself.

²⁸ But Paul shouted loudly, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.

³⁰ He led them outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your entire household.”

³² They spoke the Lord’s word to him and everyone else in his house.

³³ Right then, in the middle of the night, the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds. He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his home and gave them a meal. He was overjoyed because he and everyone in his household had come to believe in God.

³⁵ The next morning the legal authorities sent the police to the jailer with the order “Release those people.”

³⁶ So the jailer reported this to Paul, informing him, “The authorities sent word that you both are to be released. You can leave now. Go in peace.”

³⁷ Paul told the police, “Even though we are Roman citizens, they beat us publicly without first finding us guilty of a crime, and they threw us into prison. And now they want to send us away secretly? No way! They themselves will have to come and escort us out.”

³⁸ The police reported this to the legal authorities, who were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens.

³⁹ They came and consoled Paul and Silas, escorting them out of prison and begging them to leave the city.

Psalm 138 (dialogue between reader & Congregation)

I give thanks to you with all my heart, LORD.

I sing your praise before all other gods.

**² I bow toward your holy temple
and thank your name
for your loyal love and faithfulness
because you have made your name and word
greater than everything else.**

³ On the day I cried out, you answered me.

You encouraged me with inner strength.

**⁴ Let all the earth’s rulers give thanks to you, LORD,
when they hear what you say.**

⁵ Let them sing about the LORD’s ways
because the LORD’s glory is so great!

**⁶ Even though the LORD is high,
he can still see the lowly,
but God keeps his distance from the arrogant.**

⁷ Whenever I am in deep trouble,
you make me live again;
you send your power against my enemies’ wrath;
you save me with your strong hand.

**⁸ The LORD will do all this for my sake.
Your faithful love lasts forever, LORD!
Don’t let go of what your hands
have made.**

Gospel

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Human One is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.”

¹⁵ He said, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Then Jesus replied, “Happy are you, Simon son of Jonah, because no human has shown this to you. Rather my Father who is in heaven has shown you. ¹⁸ I tell you that you are Peter. And I’ll build my church on this rock. The gates of the underworld won’t be able to stand against it. ¹⁹ I’ll give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Anything you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered the disciples not to tell anybody that he was the Christ.

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:
Amen.

This is our last sermon in a series, based in the Book of Acts, that lifts up marks of the church, the behaviors that help us become the community God desires here on earth. Three weeks ago we talked about being an aspiring church, that we're always trying to be who we're meant to be. The church is not complacent, but aspires to be the Body of Christ. Two weeks ago we talked about being a scattered church, a church sent in service to God's causes and God's call. The church is not static, but dynamic as we follow Jesus to serve in the world. In last week's reading, we saw the unmistakable diversity of the God's church. The church is not homogenous, but like a body, we have many members with many different parts, purposes, gifts, and skills to bring joy and alleviate

suffering. And this week, we talk specifically of the church's call to bear persecution gracefully.

When we talk about persecution in the church, we need to know a bit of the history of Christian persecution so we don't overreact to the inconveniences that we face today. So let's travel back to 313 CE, a date that's a cliché among theologians and church historians, because in 313 CE, Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan, declaring freedom of religion to all people in the Roman empire, including Christians. This was the first time in three centuries that Christians didn't have to fear persecution throughout the empire. However, since Constantine himself became a Christian, 313 doesn't just signal the end of Christian persecution. That date is the hinge on which Christianity turns from a persecuted minority to state sponsored majority in the western world. While some Christian persecution still exists throughout the world, American and Western Christians rarely, if ever, face

anything that amounts to persecution like the early church faced. History, and the church's experience of persecution, changed in 313 CE.

So for Paul and Silas, persecution was a present and pressing reality, one with significant bodily consequences. We can't underestimate how those 300 years of persecution from the Roman government shaped the young church. The reason that the date of 313 CE is so well known is that it forever changed the face of the church. Only a few years after, in 325, the first ecumenical council of bishops happened in Nicaea, which was called together by Emperor Constantine. The purpose was to agree upon the central teachings of the church, to describe the consensus of belief among Christians from around the known world. Think about how massive this shift was. Just a few decades before, Roman emperors had been trying to extinguish the church from existence. In 303 CE, Emperor Diocletian called for the last of

major persecutions against Christians, first purging all Jesus followers from Roman legions, then demolishing churches, burning scriptures, prohibiting gatherings for worship, denying Christians legal rights in court (which led to their imprisonment and systematic torture), and even forcing Christians who were once slaves back into slavery. Though the official edicts said this should be done without bloodshed, many local governors held public executions to intimidate other Christians into obedience.

When you hear that kind of tragic, terrible legacy of persecution, it should make us much more cautious with the term persecution in regards to our current context of American civil liberties. The enforcement of separation of church and state isn't persecution, for kids still pray in schools, and teachers still pray in schools. Teachers just can't force kids to pray in schools, or to pray to a god they don't believe in. That seems a lot less like persecution and a lot more like freedom for more people. There

may be things that are legal that we don't agree with - some Christians argue that we shouldn't have legalized abortion (though we should note that the abortion rate has gone down since legalization simultaneous with the increase in welfare), while others argue that we shouldn't have legalized divorce (though we should that provides legal, financial, and spiritual protection for partners in abusive relationships), while others argue that we shouldn't legalize marijuana or euthanasia, or that we should make things like capital punishment illegal. Yet, that these things exist as possibilities in our system doesn't mean we're forced to do any of them. In other words, those state permissions do not amount to Christian persecution.

But Paul and Silas were persecuted for their faith, first beaten - an example of that torturous treatment seen in the later Diocletian persecution - and then imprisoned here in this story. At least, until even the earth quakes at the injustice they face.

Creation shakes and groans to release them from their unjust bonds. A frighteningly wonderful thing, indeed, that even the earth would recognize the injustice faced by Paul and Silas. What do we see in their behavior that identifies them as odd, and leads to their persecution, Christians?

I'm impressed with how these two bear persecution patiently. How often do we feel treated unfairly and just lose our collective minds? We go bonkers when someone cuts us off in traffic, while Paul and Silas manage to sing hymns in prison - like, you know, Alcatraz style - even though they'd done nothing wrong. That's because Jesus, the one whom we follow, told us to expect persecution. In John 15, Jesus says simply, "the world persecutes me. They will also persecute you." Paul and Silas knew to expect that the Gospel would meet resistance and lead to their persecution. But because of Constantine, we've forgotten the real ways that persecution is a result of following Christ.

More than patience, though, Paul and Silas treat their persecution as an opportunity rather than a punishment. They see an occasion that few people would see in an broken prison door. Instead of an escape hatch, they see an opening to introduce Jesus to their jailor. Rather than revel in the death of their captor, they stop him, share the life-changing message of Jesus, and invite his entire family into the church through baptism. Their patience in persecution allows them to see more clearly how God might intervene not only to save them, but to change the hearts and lives of their persecutors. They see how persecution can actually grow the church.

But Paul and Silas aren't naive idealists. They also want to end their injustice, and so they bring wisdom into their persecution. They remember they have rights as Roman citizens, and so use that as leverage to address their persecution from a legal perspective. In Rome's empire, citizens were afforded

different rights than resident aliens, members of other ethnic groups that lived in the empire but weren't official citizens, including the eligibility to vote, ability to be elected to the senate, and more complete legal rights. Those legal protections are what Paul and Silas highlight, because in Rome it was illegal to punish citizens without conviction. They play on this mistake by their captors, effectively threatening their job security, because beating and imprisoning citizens without cause was bad publicity then, and is still bad publicity now. They secure their freedom through wisdom amidst persecution.

Under persecution, Paul and Silas represent the church with patience, wisdom, and a commitment to sharing the Gospel. Now, this might seem like a futile sermon, since I just told you that we don't really face persecution the way Paul and Silas did, the way that the early church did. We in America aren't beaten for our religious beliefs. We aren't imprisoned for proclaiming Christ

crucified and risen. The people in this room do not face the problems Paul and Silas faced, and it's incredibly unlikely that we will anytime soon. Yet, that doesn't mean we don't experience some kinds of persecution.

The dictionary definition of persecution is "hostility and ill treatment, especially because of race, political, or religious beliefs." Surely we've seen signs of persecution in recent weeks. Torches of white supremacists barring the church doors to intimidate an interracial congregation praying for peace. Continued lies about refugees and rhetoric against immigrants. I've even heard recently from pastors in our own ELCA, some women, some LGBTQ+, pastors who've been created as beloved creatures of our Creator and called by God to serve the church, and pastors who've been turned away from churches because churches told their bishops, "We're not going to call a woman pastor, so don't send us any" or "Don't even bother sending us gay candidates." I've heard

this not only from pastors, but from bishops and synod staff. I've heard it from congregations that I've worshipped in. That's the problem we face, because we've gotten so comfortable as the church. Sometimes we ignore the persecution faced by others because it doesn't directly affect us, and sometimes we deny it because we've become the persecutor.

So perhaps what we need most of all, as the church, is to recognize what actually is Christian persecution and then bear it with the grace and intent of Paul and Silas. What reveals our identity as the church isn't that we're persecuted. All sorts of people face persecution. What reveals our Christian identity is why we face persecution and how we respond to it. Those two prongs make up the key. Paul and Silas face persecution because they liberated a woman who suffered from a demon and from the social exploitation of those who enslaved her. Her torment was used as a tool for her master's profit, and from that, she was set free. That

began the persecution faced by Paul and Silas. Then they responded with patience and compassion for their persecutors, and wisdom in their defense.

For us, we must name persecution when we see it, like we've recently seen in Charlottesville against people of color or against refugees, but we must also not call every inconvenience we face persecution. Equality for Christians isn't persecution. It just feels like it because we're so used to being privileged. But we can, and should, call out the persecution that we see, not just from the state, but from within the church. We must use wisdom as we advocate on behalf of our LGBTQ+ siblings as they face barriers to full inclusion in the church. We must see the opportunity for the Gospel to work through women in spiritual leadership, and maybe even change the mind of their persecutors, rather than succumb to the demands to marginalize female pastors. To bear persecution

gracefully, we must be able to recognize what is persecution, and then face it with a trust that Jesus will carry us through.

So let's review. As the church, we aspire to our God-given identity. As the church we scatter, following the Holy Spirit to the ends of the earth, even the places we've never thought of before, even the places we wouldn't otherwise go. As the church, we're diverse and must pursue diversity. And as the church that follows Jesus, we will face persecution, so we must face it with honesty by identifying what is truly persecution and approaching it with patience, wisdom, and an opportunity to introduce Jesus, even to our persecutors. It is not a simple task.

Fortunately, we don't do this on our own. You'll notice there's something that we just don't have to do as the church: save ourselves. God in Jesus brought salvation to us for such a time as this, freeing us to work instead for the betterment of the world. As an aspiring, scattered, diverse, community that bears persecution

with God's grace, we carry the message of Jesus to the whole world. As members of the body of Christ, we seek to embody Jesus to everyone that we meet, showing them unique images of the God who has saved us and desires to bring salvation to all people. It is not simple, but it is something to which we're called by God, something that's modeled by Jesus, and something we're prepared for by the Holy Spirit. Thanks be to God that God loves and trusts us to give us such a great commission. Amen.