

Keeping It Real
2nd in Faith Promise Series

Acts 16:16-34

May 29, 2022

Rev. Dr. Jenothy Irvine

Prayer - In the name of God our Creator, Jesus our Friend, and with the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit, Lord, open our hearts and minds to you.
Amen

Message

I love the church and the potential Jesus knew it had. I believe the church can transform lives. I contend that the church, if done well, can still save the world. But let's be real. The church and those in it have not always practiced what they preached, loved their neighbor as themselves, or always welcomed the outsider, fed the hungry, or clothed the naked. The church has not always promoted the love, compassion, and grace that Jesus stood for, taught and commissioned.

There are churches that will tell you exactly what to think, how to think it and accept nothing else. There are churches that will put on the best concert-type worship you have ever heard but leave you with nothing to ponder. There are churches that can pontificate with the best of the best yet say nothing of lasting value or eternal consequence. There are churches packed full of good, well intentioned people yet empty of what matters most.

I would argue there is one thing people want from church today. One thing people want from those who claim to follow Jesus, and that is real people who live in the real world, face real issues with real faith. I would argue that people

today would not be walking away from a church with authentic people genuinely striving to live out their faith alongside one another knowing it isn't always easy, expecting and experiencing challenges, existing in the messy middle, and emerging stronger, wiser, and better for having done it together. And being honest about it. People don't need more sugar coated religious talk. People don't need to be told how broken or messed up they are, how wrong they are, or how everything will be roses and rainbows if they just pray harder, read their bible more, or get to church. Is there accountability, yes. Responsibility, yes. Discipleship, yes. But people don't need to be told how broken or messed up they or the world are. They already know.

People need those that follow Jesus and believe in God to keep it real.

Paul was one of many in the bible who understood what this meant. In today's text we read an interesting experience about a demon possessed slave girl, Paul and Silas on an early mission experience, a prison guard, and the power and presence of Christ. It's reality tv back in the day.

Read Text: Acts 16:16-31 MSG

Normally, this is when I would dive deeper into the text and look at specific pieces and parts of the passage. But today, I want you to see a bigger, broader picture as if we were hovering high above the scene.

This was early in Paul's ministry. He and his companions were still in Philippi, enjoying the hospitality of their first convert, Lydia. People were still curious, fascinated but skeptical about the Message Paul was preaching. You might imagine them walking through the streets, stopping at shops, visiting with

folks along the road, answering questions, and giving people a new way to think about their life and salvation; their understanding of God.

As we take in the scene from above, we noticed the slave girl following and proclaiming who they are. We see the authorities watching closely. We see the girl's owners trying to be conspicuous, keeping a distance and observing what is going on. Then they shuffle to a side street and get the attention of a religious leader or maybe the Roman authorities. It is as if they are poking, prodding, and stirring up suspicion. All the while, all the other preachers and teachers of every kind were going about their business and persuading folks to follow them. Follow this god for better crops. Follow this god for wealth and prosperity. This god for fertility. This god for power.

In the midst of all that, in the midst of real life, there were the people; ordinary, hardworking, trying to live right and make a living, people. I wonder if they ever grew weary of it all. All the politics. All the conflicting messages from one group to another. The double standards, hidden agendas, and unfair and unjust rules. I wonder if they too were hungry for something real, something lasting.

The scene ends up with Paul and Silas beaten and in prison. Don't look away because it is there, behind bars, in the aftermath of walls shaking, and foundations cracking, one of the most important questions anyone can ask, was spoken.

"What do I have to do to be saved, to really live?" (vs 30) I love Eugene Peterson's translation of the answer, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live." (vs. 31).

Paul met people where they were, dealing with real life and addressed their question, “what must I do?” He kept it simple. He kept it real. Just as Jesus taught the disciples before him.

That was the call for the church then and the church now. I don’t have to tell you real life is all around us. That real life involves heartbreak, trauma, and tragedy. It includes poverty, illness, and food insecurity. It encompasses more than we can comprehend and demands more than we think we can give or endure. It is pain and suffering - beauty and ugliness - celebration and grief - victory and defeat. And there in the middle of it, is the sustaining presence of God. Weeping. Yelling. Grieving.

What does keeping it real mean? I believe it means:

- Standing in the face of difficulty and admitting you don’t have the answers all the while trusting Jesus stands with you.
- Investing in programs and organizations that take on tough situations.
- Trusting God will provide even if you don’t know how it will all work out.
- Acknowledging that followers of Jesus struggle, mess up, and need grace just as much as anyone else.
- Recognizing the people and places that make you uncomfortable and valuing what they or it has to offer.

What does keeping it real look like? I think it looks like:

- All kinds of people working and serving together.
- Providing safe places for people to grow in their faith and understanding of God.
- Honest conversations, transparent actions, and genuine compassion.
- Seeing a need and doing something about it. Anything. Something.
- Your love for God and Jesus lived out in ordinary, everyday ways.

Faith Promise as one way this church keeps it real. What I mean by that is, when we participate in what has been named our Faith Promise Campaign, the people of Grace undergird the outreach, partnerships, and organizations that are the hands, feet, face, and voice of Jesus to people locally, nationally, and internationally. When you give to Faith Promise, you do so with a reliance on God that by God's grace, God will provide.

Last week, Pastor Andy encouraged you to "keep it simple" and reminded you of the covenant promise of God - to be the God of Israel through thick and thin, generation to generation; to write on our hearts the law of love and justice found God.

Faith Promise then is our act of trust that God is our God and we are God's people and God will use who we are and what we have to impact the world around us whether it is one client at a time at Kic-it, ASSIST, or Interchurch Food Pantry or it is for 300 children and youth through United Way Christmas Angels and Operation Bundle Up.

In the last twelve months, Faith Promise monies and have supported twenty-four international organizations, thirteen national organizations, forty one local organizations, and fifteen state organizations. Church that is ninety organizations you have helped and supported all on faith. The more important number is the one we can't count. Can't put a price on. The people those organizations have helped because we helped.

Faith Promise is simple - give to God what you can and trust God will do the rest. Faith promise is real - what you give goes directly to real people with real needs.

With that I come full circle. With all its flaws and shortcomings. With all its cynics, hypocrites, and it's slow to change attitude. With all that it gets wrong and all it gets right. With all the ways it can try my patience, I still love the church and the potential Jesus saw in it. I believe, if done well, the church does transform lives and yes, even save the world. Keep faith. Keep it simple. Keep it real.

Amen.