

*Lessons From the Early Church—Part 4:**“Modeling Matters”*

Easter 7C-19

Acts 16

John 14

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Rev. Rob Carter

“Lessons from the Early Church—Part 4:
Modeling Matters”

What could make prisoners pass up such an easy chance to escape?

What force of nature? What grand treasure? What new reality could possibly be worth sitting in a prison cell when your shackles are broken and the cell door is opened, freeing you to return to the life you once knew?

That’s the question in our first lesson this morning. That’s the life-changing question the prison guard so desperately needed answered.

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When we last left Paul, Silas, and Timothy, they were in a city called Philippi, striving to share the Good News of God’s love. But as our lesson this morning reveals, trouble seems to have a way of finding these early church travelers.

A slave-girl who was possessed by an evil spirit happened upon the three men in their travels. Eventually, Paul grew annoyed by her presence—or at least the demon’s presence. So he freed the girl from the demon. The whole situation raises a ton of questions about Paul’s frustration with the girl, and why he wouldn’t care enough to free her not just from the demon but her enslaved status.

Regardless, the girl’s masters are incensed. They’d been making money off the slave girl’s ability to predict the future. But now that Paul freed her from the fortune-telling spirit, she couldn’t earn them any more money.

So the girl’s masters aim to get even. They draw Paul and Silas up on charges and eventually succeed in having them thrown in the jail.

But Acts is careful to mention... Paul and Silas weren’t just thrown into the city jail. They were thrown into the innermost cell of the prison. The cell hardest to escape from... the cell likely reserved for the worst, most dangerous offenders.

Next thing we know, it’s about midnight. Paul and Silas are praying and singing hymns to God in the cell while the other prisoners listen. Suddenly, there’s a giant earthquake. But this isn’t the kind of earthquake that leaves people trapped. This is a divine kind of earthquake that shakes the prison’s foundations, and breaks the prisoners’ shackles, and unlocks the prison doors flinging them wide open. Each and every prisoner is suddenly unbound and unchained, free to escape should any choose to do so.

When the prison guard rushes in, hoping to find the prison still secure, he sees the cell doors flung open and begins to realize his worst fears. Acts says he is so distraught, so terrified by the thought of facing the wrath of his masters, he contemplates suicide.

But Paul yells out to the guard, “Don’t worry. We’re all here. Every prisoner present and accounted for.”

The guard... he can’t believe it. He’s overwhelmed. He approaches Paul and Silas, and falls to his knees, overcome by shock and grace and questions. Lots and lots of questions.

Why didn’t you all leave?

Why didn’t you all run away from this hell hole when you had the chance?

Why didn’t you behave as I expect prisoners to behave?

What force of nature? What grand treasure? What new reality could possibly be worth staying in a prison cell even when your shackles are removed and the cell door flung open?

I suspect these questions and more flood the guard. But only one escapes his lips. “What... what must *I* do to be saved?” What must I do to uncover the peace these prisoners have suddenly found? What must I do to experience the grace you clearly live by?”

Now, as far as we know the prison guard hasn’t heard Paul or Silas speak a word about Jesus or the love of God. But he has seen what those prisoners had seen. He has witnessed the peace they modeled. The grace they revealed. So he knew there was something different about these men... Paul and Silas. He knew there was something transformative... something that he wanted for himself and his family. So he asked to be baptized. And for his family to be baptized.

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You see, friends, as important as words are to the life of faith... As much as I believe we are called to use our mouths to tell the story of God’s love... and use our lips to share things like mercy and grace and compassion... the early church understood words can only go so far. We can talk about peace. We can talk about hope. We can talk about love. But if we don’t *show* them... If we don’t *model* them... If our lives don’t *reveal* them... people will sense that our words are hollow, and our faith, inauthentic.

It’s why modeling matters. We have to demonstrate—show—model to the world around us how our faith shapes the way we live. How the values of our faith form the way we treat both family and stranger... both neighbor and enemy.

Of course, I realize I’m not saying anything new here. Developmental psychologists have long been telling parents how important it is for them to model the behaviors and values they want to instill in their children.

They tell us it’s not enough to simply tell our children to eat healthy diets. Kids need to see their parents eating a healthy diet, too.

It's not enough for parents to tell their kids to study. Kids need to hear their parents inquire into their schoolwork. Kids need to know their parents care enough about their schoolwork that the parent is willing to invest their own time and energy in exploring their schoolwork with their kid.

The same thing holds true for faith. We can tell our children that faith matters. That they should go to church and pray to God and invest in a growing relationship with Jesus Christ. But if our children never see *us* practice our faith—whether it's praying at the dinner table or reading Scripture or wrestling with a tough faith question or giving gifts of money or time to a worthy cause—if our kids don't see us doing these things ourselves... if our kids never share conversations with parents about the parent's own faith... then, regardless of what we might say, they see through our lack of actions that our faith must not be all that important after all.

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It's similar to what education theory identifies as the "null curriculum." Have you heard about it before? The null curriculum is a theory that seeks to examine what is "not" being taught. What we inadvertently teach our children is not important simply because we don't talk about it with them. Because when we fail to talk about something... when we fail to practice it at all... whether it's something like arts or music or cultural history... or matters of faith like inclusion and compassion and generosity... when we fail to talk about and practice these things with our children... we're teaching them that, well, it must not be very important.

This is why I believe the church really has to start paying closer attention to the null curriculum. For the truth is... we show others—not just our kids—but we show everyone around us what we value and what's important by what we do AND what we don't do.

People look at what we invest in, and what we don't invest in. People see how we spend our time and energy and money, and how we don't spend time, energy, and money, and innately see what is and isn't important to us. Just as people see the way we treat others. People see the way we treat the one who wronged us. People see the way we treat the one who is different from us. People see the kindness or apathy with which approach someone in need. Just as people see the grudges or grace we carry... the peace or anxiety by which we live.

And all of it... ALL of it... proclaims not just to our children, but to the world around us exactly who we really are... and what we really value.

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This is why, when Jesus knew he was approaching the end of his earthly life and was praying his final prayer according to John... of all we might think Jesus would pray for... of all we might think Jesus should pray for, Jesus' ultimate prayer in this life was for his followers.

"...all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me."

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You see, Jesus understood that the peace... the love... the grace... the compassion of his kingdom could not spread *through* this world if his followers didn't genuinely model them *to* the world. So he prayed for their unity. He prayed for our unity. That in our unity and our love of each other, we might not only talk the talk of faith, but live lives that model it for our children... and our neighbors... and those neighbors who are complete strangers.

As the early church demonstrated, that is how the kingdom grows. When people witness in us what the prison guard saw in that prison cell. Lives transformed. Lives touched and changed by love and grace. Lives lived amid a peace that surpasses understanding. Lives lived amid the pursuit not of personal pride or accomplishment, but of the common good.

It is, friends, the very life we see modeled for us right here. At this very table. Where Christ has left us both a feast and a lesson. Where Christ offers us gifts of grace and love, as well as a charge to go forth from this table showing and sharing these gifts to the world. That as this is Christ's body, broken for us, we might model for all the world, what the body of Christ looks like today.