

What Experiences Have Shaped Us as Persons and as a Church?

Acts 16:11-34

One of the most important things a church can do is to provide spiritual experiences that shape and deepen our spiritual lives. So today we are talking together about those experiences which have shaped us as persons and as a church.

I

Our young people have reported to us their Baptist Youth Camp experiences. And I am most grateful to Andora who for many years has helped provide our youth these kinds of experiences.

John Westerhoff, theologian and professor of Christian Nurture writes that we as parents and church should provide a set of experiences for our children and youth as they are on their sacred journey toward faith.

- 1) We need to tell and re-tell the Biblical Story and its stories of faith until the Biblical Story becomes our common story.
- 2) We need to celebrate our faith as we participate in worship together.
- 3) We need to listen and tell one another about our spiritual experiences and our relationship to God.

4) We need to pray together

5) We need to perform faithful acts of service to others together.

His list should spark many memories and stories in you.

II

I chose as our text a few days in the life of Paul and Silas in Philippi. The book of Acts is full of stories of the experiences of people as the church began its life and mission in the Hellenistic world. Someone has said that the shortest distance between two people is a story. Here are some stories.

Paul and Silas had arrived in Philippi, a Roman colony. They began looking for a synagogue as a home base. Finding none, they went to the riverside, for when there was not a synagogue, Jews would meet near a riverside to worship.

There they met a woman named Lydia, a woman of means and a dealer in purple goods. She is described as a “God-worshipper”. Today we might call her a “seeker”, or one who is “spiritual but not religious.” When Paul talked to her about Jesus, it resonated deeply within her. It gave her spirituality a home. Paul baptized her and her household and she offered her home to be the house-church for new Christians in Philippi.

Do you remember the early days of our founding as a church as we met in homes?

We offer a community to others where their spiritual lives can find a home.

III

Then as they were on the way to place of prayer they met a slave girl who was being exploited by her owners for money. She had sooth-saying, or fortune telling, powers and her owners used her for financial gain. Paul exorcised the demon in her which gave her those powers.

This is what the gospel does: free us from all that enslaves us. We offer a home where we can be set free from our destructive patterns, a place to get well and get whole. People come broken and we offer the kind of healing love brings.

But trouble was brewing. The slave owners were furious that Paul had ruined their money making scheme. They did not care about the girl but about the money she brought. The slave owners seized Paul and Silas, dragged them before the magistrates and had them beaten and thrown into jail.

Sometimes when we are about the work of justice and emancipation we can get into trouble, “good trouble”, as John Lewis put it, but trouble nonetheless.

IV

During their night in jail they began singing and praying. All the prisoners could hear them. “Who are these guys?”, they thought to themselves.

It reminds me of the Civil Rights hero, Fannie Lou Hamer who when encountered with trouble would start singing, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine.” Soon others joined her. It became an anthem for Civil Rights activists.

Then an earthquake shook the foundations of the jail and broke the shackles of all the prisoners. The jailer who was responsible for the prisoners, supposing that all the prisoners had escaped, drew a sword to kill himself. But Paul cried out “Do Not Harm Yourself!”

This is our message to those who are in such distress they want to end their lives. “Do not harm yourself. You are a beloved child of God.”

IV

Long story short, the jailer became a believer in Jesus. He took Paul and Silas to his house where he and his household were baptized. I love the picture this scene paints. Paul and Silas took water and baptized them, and they took water and washed their wounds.

Not many of our experiences are as dramatic as these, but we have been touched by the love of God and the love of the community. And we have been givers of God’s love to others. We have our own stories and our own experiences that have changed us. What are some? You first.