

When Jesus Met Caesar

On Sunday, we talked about Acts 16, using it as an example of how the Gospel message challenged Roman culture in the earliest days of Christianity.

1. Warm up question: Most of us naturally tend to be conformists; we want to be like everyone else. But the truth is, we're all unique in various ways. What's something quirky you do that other people might consider weird? Do you hide your quirkiness or let it shine?

2. When he was among us, Jesus modeled a radically different approach to spirituality. An integral part of Jesus's spirituality was to champion the poor, the oppressed, and the excluded. In fact, his ministry became such a challenge to the status quo that "the powers-that-be" decided they had to crush him. But when they stomped on Jesus, it backfired. Their actions ended up releasing a million tiny Jesus followers into the world, like the spider video Jeff showed on Sunday. Acts 16 illustrates how these early followers carried forward Jesus' challenge to the culture of their time. Read Acts 16:11-15.
 - a. What do you know about how women were regarded and treated in the culture of the first century Roman Empire? In general, how were they regarded? Spiritually, how were they regarded?
 - b. Why do you suppose Paul took his message to women who gathered outside the gates of the city by the river, instead of going to those who were more powerful and influential?
 - c. How do you suppose the men of Philippi felt about Paul providing direct spiritual instruction to women? How do you suppose the women felt?
 - d. What might we learn from this part of the story about how Jesus followers should relate to marginalized people in their culture?

3. Read Acts 16:16-24.
 - a. Although we don't know the backstory about this slave girl, let's try to imagine it. Someone think aloud about how she might have reached this place in life?
 - b. Why do you suppose the slave girl kept shouting about Paul and Silas being "slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation"? Why was she so fixated on them?
 - c. After the slave girl's encounter with Paul and Silas, she either could not or would not continue telling fortunes, which destroyed her economic value to her owners and made them furious. What might we learn from this part of the story about how Jesus followers should relate to the most vulnerable people in their culture?

4. Read Acts 16:25-34.
 - a. How do you think Paul and Silas' singing affected the other prisoners? When the earthquake hit, why do you suppose the other prisoners didn't flee?
 - b. Think of a really difficult time in your life. Did you sing in the dark? If so, how did that affect things? If not, how did that affect things? Why is singing so important in darkest times?
 - c. What factors may have moved the jailer to want to become a Jesus follower?
5. Read Acts 16:35-40.
 - a. Why do you suppose Paul and Silas refused to be released from prison quietly?
 - b. Throughout this story, how would you characterize Paul and Silas' attitude toward "the-powers-that-be"? What should we learn from that?
6. As Jeff shared on Sunday, theologian Brian McLaren sees Acts 16 as a powerful example of how early Christians boldly followed the example of Jesus by challenging entrenched oppression and prejudice in their culture. McLaren laments that so many Jesus followers today seem to have lost that passion and focus, often instead becoming the champions of society's most entrenched forces.
 - a. How do you see it? Is this an essential part of authentic Christianity? Is it incumbent on every Christian to give high priority to challenging oppression and injustice? Why or why not?
 - b. Why do you think so many churches and individual Christians have ceased to be at the forefront of struggles for justice and equality?
7. On Sunday, Jeff highlighted two serious social issues in our culture today – racial discrimination and poverty.
 - a. When was the last time you personally did something (small or large) to challenge either racial discrimination or poverty? Tell us what happened? Do you feel personally called to challenge racial discrimination and poverty?
 - b. Jeff said he believes that God is calling LifeJourney to begin to apply all we learned in the struggle for LGBT equality to other pressing issues. Given who we are as a congregation at LifeJourney, Jeff suggested the next great justice issues we are called to tackle might be racial discrimination and poverty. What do you think?