

## Cutting Corners

May 12, 2013

Acts 16:16-34

“Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take”

Many, maybe most of us, learned that prayer as a young child, and probably many of us taught it to our own children and grandchildren.

It's certainly a way to teach children to make prayer a part of their life, although some young people have confided to me that they really didn't like to say it because they didn't want to face the idea that they might not wake up again once they went to sleep.

And of course there are other prayers as well. Prayers learned in childhood have a way of slipping in and out of consciousness in later life. Their remembrance may be triggered by a word or an idea, or perhaps even a feeling.

Another such prayer came to mind as I was thinking about this message. It's one that I remember one of my youth talking with me about when I was a youth pastor many years ago. I don't recall the specifics of when or why it was learned, although I vaguely remember it had to do with confirmation instruction.

It is a very simple prayer, at least in length. As far as content, however, it runs deceptively deep. The prayer goes as follows: “Lord Jesus: for you I live, for you I suffer, for you I die.”

Some might hear that as a rather curious prayer to be teaching children or youth. After all, we don't want them associating the church or Jesus with suffering or dying.

They might not want to come back to church, or they might end up going to those places where you just hear the good and happy things about faith.

Well, there is some truth to that – but on balance, the kind of faith we teach our children tends to be the kind of faith they possess as adults.

It's a bit like what happens with the “inheritance” of religious musical preferences. I recall a church in a community where I used to serve.

This church had a huge Sunday school program with its own youth hymnal. It contained a lot of gospel choruses that were considered, rightly or wrongly, easier to sing.

Some of the youth in that Sunday School said they couldn't wait to "graduate" to church so that they could sing out of the "real" hymnal.

The problem was, a lot of those kids attended only Sunday school and never went to church. So they grew up assuming the choruses of the Sunday school were the be-all and end-all of religious music – and, perhaps, that the theology chorused therein was as far and as deep as it got.

Care needs to be taken in passing on faith's music as well as its message, lest we create a generation semi-illiterate of the gospel's wholeness.

I think particularly of some of the "praise choruses" that are so popular in many places today. Not to put them down – they have a place. But some have no message or teaching, just a constant repetition of one word or phrase over and over. In my judgment, that should never and must never be all that we offer in worship.

"Lord Jesus: for you I live, for you I suffer, for you I die."

I hear in that prayer a recovery of some of the wholeness that has been lost in a time when too much of faith's focus has been centered on "what's in it for me."

What have I got to gain by being faithful, or entering this or that Christian fellowship? Will I be healthier, will I be wealthier, will I be friendlier, will I be safer?

A number of prayers and teachings in this past decade became for many people just such an association of believing right with living well.

From the perspective of this prayer taught to children, those issues are not wrong because they are unreal or even undesirable, but because their starting point is misdirected.

For the Christian faith's "magnetic north" is not self-concern, but Christ-concern. For *you* (Christ) I live, for *you*, I suffer, for *you* I die. We start out by entrusting our lives and destinies to God in the trust of gracious love, not by striking a deal on what is most beneficial to me and mine.

Yet another part of the balance and wholeness of faith this prayer would bring to individuals and communities of faith in our day and age is the hard recognition that faith does not always come without cost.

This prayer is not just about commitment when we are "living": that is, when things are going well and health is strong and security is assured. "For you I *suffer*, for you I *die*."

Faith in and relationship with Jesus Christ remain one of those few things worthy of paying the supreme price for – and worthy of holding on to when all else is collapsing around us.

Paul and Silas, the central characters in our text from Acts this morning, time and again placed their lives in jeopardy solely for the sake of the gospel. The account Jeannine read earlier of beating and torture and imprisonment bring them to the brink of losing their lives.

It is not like such things ended with the closing of the biblical testimony or even the eventual acceptance of Christianity as a legitimate religion in the Roman Empire.

Even the sketchiest of knowledge about the expansion of the church and the proclamation of the gospel in the centuries since then, including our own, shows that this prayer has been tested and experienced to its ultimate degree.

People *have* suffered, people *have* died, simply for the sake of bearing Christ's name.

Such experiences can cause problems for all the rest of us who have never found ourselves before an inquisition, much less an executioner. As a result, we might be led to question the depth of our own faith.

For if it is something I am supposed to be ready to suffer and even die for, does a lack of such suffering or dying for its sake make my faith any less genuine or valid than the martyrs?

My answer to that is no. Nowhere in the biblical materials or church traditions do I hear us encouraged to seek out suffering and death as proof of our sincerity.

The book of Acts tells no story that I can think of about the apostles deliberately bringing suffering upon themselves in order to validate their faith. Their call, as our call, is to proclaim and live the gospel in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in.

Indeed, Paul advises his young friend Timothy to pray that "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life" (1 Tim 2:2).

So unlike those who beat themselves on the back as an expression of devotion, or who routinely deny themselves the simple gifts of food and shelter as a red badge of discipleship: we are not called to self-inflict the "cost" of our faith.

Yet, neither are we to run from such cost. And this brings up a second part to the problem of not experiencing the extreme costs of faith. For if we prepare only for the worst, we might not be ready for all the little costs that faith might be called to endure in the meantime.

The Apostle Peter said he was ready to go to the cross and offer up his own life with his Lord. But when it came down to a simple admission of truth in difficult circumstances, Peter chose to lie in order to save his own skin, not once but three times.

In our text from Acts, the owners of the fortune-telling slave girl were willing to let her ply her trade nearby Paul and Silas. They didn't even stop her when her soothsaying led her to acclaim the two evangelists as servants of God.

However, when Paul and Silas exorcise the spirit that possessed the girl, that's when things hit the fan. Her owners did not rejoice in her healing. They could only see it as a loss in profit, and for them the price of the gospel was too high in dollars to pay.

In the freeing of their slave girl, the owners were not being challenged by the gospel to pay the supreme sacrifice – only to find a new way of augmenting their income. And they refused . . . and in their refusal, Paul and Silas very nearly end up dead.

And yet.....

Do you hear them grumbling?  
Do you hear them criticizing everybody else?  
Do you hear them running everybody else down?  
Do you hear them talking or complaining?

Paul said, "We will not look at our difficulties. We will not measure the height of these walls, neither will we look at any of this." The inner prison was indescribable, but Paul said, "I will remember the Lord God who split the Red Sea and He is the God of the cloud and the fire."

"I know that I cannot curse the darkness, there is only one thing that can take care of the darkness. I will light a little torch. Let's sing. I know that it is midnight, but I am going to use everything I have.

My hands are in stocks. My feet are in bonds. I'm beaten but I can wiggle my fingers and toes. I have a mouth. I am not going to wait for big things. I am not going to wait for the moment."

They turned a place of torture into a cathedral of triumph and set the city and continent ablaze. The man responsible was a handcuffed man, a chained man, but he pushed back the horizon.

Write history even if it is not time to write history. Bound, contemptible, weak physically, yet he shook the Roman Empire. It was this little man who said, "None of these things move me!"

The lesson in that for me, and I think for us, goes back to the prayer we've been considering this morning – and the truth that the "suffering and dying" spoken of need not and most often *are* not experienced by us in the extreme.

I have never in my life come close to being in prison or being in a position of dying for what I believe. There have been times, however, where cutting a corner has been very appealing – too appealing, to be perfectly honest with you.

Times where lashing back at someone in anger would have been, and sometimes was, my first choice. Times where a relationship stood to be adversely affected if I stood fast to my beliefs not just as a minister but simply as a Christian – and I chose, like Peter, the path of least resistance.

One always wonders about the readiness to put one's life on the line if called to, for Christ and church.

And yet for me, and I suspect for most of you, that is not where the real test comes.

The real test of our faith's integrity comes in all the little moments, where what is at stake is not a lot of suffering – but just enough to make us uncomfortable, small enough that we think our choice of unfaith might be so minor and small as to be unimportant or go unseen.

But how does Christ understand the order of things to be? “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and he who is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.” That's what Christ said.

You see, the gospel has a way of turning things around, if not upside-down. For when we are worried about how we might someday do with the “big test,” the “supreme sacrifice,” and how that will reveal the kind of persons we really are, Christ's concern is with the daily and mundane choices.

For in them, our character is more frequently and I believe more truly revealed than in the once-in-a-lifetime crises that may never come.

How are we Christians going to respond to God?

Everyday, we should make a decision on how we are really going to live. Are we going to live as God in Christ calls us to live, or are we going to follow the path of least resistance, cutting a few corners maybe thinking that God won't really mind if we're a little off base.

Or, worse yet, not even thinking about God's call on our lives.

“Lord Jesus, for you I live, for you I suffer, for you I die.”

A common prayer, pointing us to an uncommon life. May it be a prayer illuminating every day of our lives. A prayer calling us to faith, even and especially when faith starts to cost: no matter how much, no matter how little. Lord Jesus, for you. Amen.