

The Power of Family Religion
Proverbs 8:1-4; Acts 16:25-34; John 16:12-15

June 16, 2019

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I don't do this often, but today the sermon is drawn from a secondary message in the text. In seminary we were taught that the greatest power of a text is in the text's primary message, and I certainly believe that to be true. In the text from Acts 16, the primary message has to do with who is free. Paul and Silas were in chains and behind bars, apparently not free. The city officials put them in prison because Paul and Silas freed a slave girl who was being abused by her owners. She was a slave, but then she was set free. A jailer who was not in chains or behind bars guarded Paul and Silas. He was free to go to his home and family as he pleased. He was free, or was he?

As this story unfolds, everything changes. Those who at first appeared to be free turned out to be enslaved in a deeper sense. It was the jailer, not in chains and not behind bars, who cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" Or, as some suggest, what must I do to be free? And it was Paul, Silas, and the slave girl, those in chains of some sort, who were actually free. They had experienced the deeper freedom about which Jesus spoke, "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

The primary message of this text, then, has to do with freedom in Christ. Having the key to someone else's jail cell does not make you free. Having the life of Christ within you, that is what makes you free indeed. That's the primary message.

A secondary message of this text has to do with the jailer's family. Did you notice what happened to his family? The jailer was responsible for guarding Paul and Silas and the other prisoners. The text says that a great earthquake shook the prison at midnight. The chains fell off the prisoners. Notice the reaction of the jailer when he discovered what had happened. The text says that he drew his sword to kill himself. Apparently the consequences of losing a prisoner were worse than suicide. But the text says that Paul called out with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

When the jailor realized that Paul and Silas had not escaped, that he instead had been given a great gift, even life itself, he humbly asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

This is what Paul and Silas said. Notice in particular the part about the jailer’s family. “Believe on the Lord Jesus,” they said, “and you will be saved, *you and your household.*” Paul and Silas then spoke the word of the Lord to this jailer and all who were in his house, i.e., his family, presumably his wife, his children, and maybe even parents. The text says that this jailer and his entire family were baptized that night. The earthquake occurred at midnight, so the baptism must have been some time in the wee hours of the morning. The jailer’s whole family, and presumably Paul and Silas, rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

What we see in this secondary message is an example of family religion. Something similar happened to Lydia earlier in this same chapter (16:15) and to Cornelius (11:14) before that. Faith came to one and the whole family was baptized. Some say that texts like these are what led to the practice of infant baptism. I find other significance in these texts, matters of faith that pertain to today’s family. I see the power of family religion.

First, there is the realization that every family is teaching a religion of some sort. The question for families is, “What kind of religion are you teaching?” New Testament scholars believe that the jailer in this text was a man named Stephanas, one of the few individuals Paul personally baptized. It is believed that he and his family became very involved in the church in the city of Corinth, and that he and two others were the ones who hand delivered the letter of I Corinthians from Paul to the church in Corinth (*IDB*, vol. 4, p. 441). After his conversion and baptism, we know that he became very involved in the faith, very involved in the church in Corinth, and that was the sort of religion his family taught.

But what about before his conversion? What sort of religion did he teach then? Dr. Frank Stagg, who was once a theologian in residence here at Weatherly, says that this is one of the key passages in the book of Acts. The early church was trying to work out whether the pagan world could be saved, or whether Christ came only for the Jews. This is what Dr. Stagg writes, “This jailer was the first clear case of a Gentile’s conversion out of paganism and apart from Jewish influence” (*The Book of Acts*, p. 172).

Before his conversion, that was the sort of religion taught in the jailer's family, Gentile paganism. Either explicitly or implicitly that is what he taught. Most likely his children would have grown up to believe much the way he did. That is the power of family religion...for good or not.

It is a pretty sobering realization for all of us, isn't it? All of our families are teaching a religion of some sort. Just like our children pick up our physical mannerisms, our speech patterns, our gestures, so they pick up our spiritual mannerisms, our beliefs about life, faith, and religion. So what kind of religion are we teaching? Is it informed belief in Christ and his way in the world? Are we teaching them to reach for the highest ideals of our faith, for the great beliefs of true righteousness, justice for all people, and a deep respect for life and this earth we call home? Are we teaching them to reach deeply into the scriptures, to think for themselves, and to have the courage to stand firm in those convictions they have worked out with fear and trembling? What sort of religion are we teaching?

My friend Sarah Shelton is one of only a few female Baptist pastors in Alabama. She is at Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham; some of you know her. She has actually just retired. As you can imagine, she has had a lot of ugly things directed toward her, all in the name of God. It makes you wonder where she finds her strength of conviction? She was interviewed once about the influences on her life. Her father, Dr. Lamar Jackson, was pastor of Birmingham's Southside Baptist Church during that church's great days. She said that he certainly influenced her. Her mother did too. Sarah said of her mother, "She kept introducing other women into my life who were strong to keep me exposed to what the possibilities were. It had a huge impact on me." The overriding lesson taught in her family, she said, was this: "There's not anything you can't do" (EthicsDaily.com, May 7, 2003).

I guess that included being the pastor of a Baptist church. What a powerful religion that family taught. We all teach one. The question is, What sort of religion are we teaching?

Here is another significant teaching of this text. **What happens to the parents in a family also happens to the children on the children's level.** It was the jailer, Stephanas, who had the religious conversion, but the

text says that the entire family was baptized. Everyone in the family, at their level, experienced what he did.

This was a case of--when dad got religion, everybody in the family got religion. Now, I don't want to press this too far, but there is some truth to it. You could call this the spiritual trickle down theory. What happens to parents in a family happens to the children on the children's level.

Former President Jimmy Carter says that this was true for him. The faith of his father, a Sunday school teacher and deacon at Plains Baptist Church, is alive and well in him today. Jimmy Carter's father taught the junior boys' Sunday school class, boys age nine to twelve. So when Jimmy turned nine, he entered his dad's Sunday school class. He says that he had the double influence of the general church environment, which was very important in his family, and his father's Sunday school teaching. As he grew older, though, Jimmy Carter says that he began to doubt those early teachings, even the fundamentals of the faith. He finished school at the Naval Academy in Annapolis and his naval career was advancing, when he was called home to Plains to his father's deathbed. He calls his father's death "a turning point in my spiritual life" (*Living Faith*, p. 23).

He began reading some of the great theologians, as he tried to work out what he believed. He calls this time of struggle "a tortuous time of searching" (p. 25). I can identify with that, as can many of you. Jimmy Carter says that the writings of the theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr helped him to make sense of faith.

Today Jimmy Carter, like his father before him, teaches Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains and is a deacon. And, as you know, people drive from many hours away to hear his Sunday school lessons. What happened to Jimmy Carter's father happened to him. As a young adult, Jimmy Carter made it his own. That is the power of family religion.

Family religion is truly powerful...for good and not. In that incubator we call home, young lives are molded and older lives are honored. It may be a secondary message of this text, but it certainly is relevant to our time, isn't it? That's the power of family religion.

Closing Prayer

O Lord, make our families home to vibrant, informed faith. May our families be schools of righteousness and love for your name's sake. Amen.