

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

“Lessons From Jail”

May 20, 2007
Acts 16: 16-34

Have any of you seen the new show on Fox hosted by Jeff Foxworthy called: “*Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader?*” The show’s debut in February was the most-watched show for Fox in its entire history, with 26.5 million viewers. There are some cute features. As contestants try to answer ten questions, they can “peek” at another student’s paper, or even “copy” their work, or—in extreme cases — they might need to get “saved.” But the cuteness ends when those who are not smarter than a 5th grader are humiliated and abused, mortified by their lack of knowledge in front of 26.5 million people. When a contestant loses on this show, or “drops out” of class, he or she has to peer into the camera and say to millions of viewers, “I am NOT smarter than a fifth-grader.” That’s humiliation. Especially when you have to say it in front of six adorable children who have been playing along with you.

I was fascinated when one woman was asked the question, “Which of the seven continents is also a country?” She correctly named all seven of the continents (Asia, Africa, North America, South America, Antarctica, Europe and Australia), but she couldn’t get past her conviction that: “...they’re all countries!” So she had to take her money and drop out. Asked what her answer would have been had she risked it all, she said “Europe.”

Do our six High School graduates being honored today want to come on up and take the “*Are You Smarter Than a Fifth-Grader*” quiz?

1. What is the plural form of the word Moose? (Moose)
2. True or False: The bottlenose dolphin is a fish. (False)
3. What nation has the longest border with the United States? (Canada)
4. How many sides does a trapezoid have? (Four)
5. In the Constitution you must live in the U.S. for how long before you can become President? (14 years)
6. Who was the first president to be impeached? (Andrew Johnson)
7. True or false: The ostrich is the fastest bird on land. (True)
8. How many years is one term for a U.S. representative? (Two)
9. What is the currency of Puerto Rico? (US dollar)

10. Entymologists study what? (Insects)

Do you think you are smarter than a 5th grader? Fifth graders have gotten a lot smarter since I was in their place. You can take these quizzes any time at www.fox.com.

This show only affirms that knowledge is the key to success in this global marketplace. We know that information is the commodity which will open doors to the future. But knowledge is not everything. Head knowledge without heart knowledge is hollow and can even be dangerous. Emotional intelligence and spiritual intelligence are equally important. Unless it is used for a greater good, to help and heal and humanize, knowledge can be destructive and harmful. Humility, kindness, compassion and love matter as much, if not more.

Our Lectionary Scripture text this morning from the book of Acts offers some significant life lessons for all of us, not just our graduates or 5th graders. It tells of a daring adventure involving Paul and his buddy Silas. Paul drives an evil spirit out of a slave girl, and her owners are very upset. A public brawl ensues, and the crowd looks for scapegoats. So they have Paul and Silas arrested and thrown in jail for disturbing the peace. They are thrown in a jail cell in Phillipi, but they seem happy, they are singing and smiling and praying. Their positive attitude gets the attention of some other prisoners, standing as a powerful witness to their character and faith. Then, a miraculous earthquake shakes the jail open, offering a divinely planned escape, yet oddly enough, Paul and Silas do not bolt for the hills in their prison jump-suits. Paul and Silas stay in jail when given the chance to leave. Their choice to stay in custody seemed to have a personal motivation. Not only did they see their mission in that Philipian prison as a means of bringing hope to prisoners, they also sought to bring hope to the jailer himself. Seeing that the jailer would commit suicide if they escaped, Paul and Silas chose his life and salvation over their own freedom. In the end the jailer becomes a Christian, and his entire family come to know God.

The boldness of Paul and Silas should speak to us all. They did not shrink in fear from inside prison walls. Paul would even see his frequent incarcerations as evidence of his qualification as a follower of Jesus.

Being in prison was a way of identifying with Jesus and reaching out to others. So this experience of Paul and Silas has several things to teach us, as we seek to follow Jesus in our time.

Look for the positive in every situation

Paul and Silas see opportunities, not roadblocks. They see breaks, not barriers. Adversity is an opportunity for praise. Trapped in the belly of the Philippian prison, most people would have cried, cursed, and despaired. But not these two. About midnight, they are praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners are listening to them. They see a chance to reach out to someone about to commit suicide, instead of pursuing their own freedom. They are so courageous and brave, seeing things through God's eyes, not through the lens of their own selfishness. They look for the blessings in a terrible situation.

I am similarly impressed by so many people who have every reason to despair, but they do not. Stephen Hawking, for example. He is a theoretical physicist, currently professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, known for his contributions to the fields of cosmology, quantum gravity and black holes. When he was 21 years old he developed ALS, commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Over the years he lost the use of his arms, legs, voice, and is now completely paralyzed. He communicates through an infra-red blink switch attached to his glasses. When he scrunches his right cheek he is able to compose speeches, do research and even send email. Hawking considers himself lucky, and does not curse his fate. He said that before he got ALS his life was unfocused and meaningless. Now he is significantly contributing to the advancement of science and deeper understanding of the universe. This disease inspired him to be focused and consider the big picture of God's creation. If Stephen Hawking, who cannot even move his body, considers himself lucky, then we should too. The only real disability in life is a bad attitude and lack of gratitude. Life is a gift, no matter what it sends our way.

Secondly, the adventures of Paul and Silas teach us that it is important to:

Know which rules to keep and which rules to break

During his missionary career, Paul spent more time in prison than out of it. He was always in trouble for causing a disturbance, doing things he should not do, threatening the authorities. No doubt he learned from Jesus, who was similarly in trouble for healing on the sabbath, eating with sinners, speaking to outcasts, lepers, women. In the end Jesus was crucified for breaking the rules of the authorities, Now I am not recommending breaking the law, please do not misunderstand me. For the most part, rules and laws are there for our protection and we should obey them. But there are

occasions when you need to bend and even break the rules to serve a higher calling. There are occasions when rules must be broken, and people of vision throughout history have understood this.

Mahatma Ghandi led the nation of India to independence through mass civil disobedience based upon non-violence. His methods inspired Dr. Martin Luther King and the American Civil Rights movement. Both of these great men spent time in jail because they broke the rules.

Susan B. Anthony was arrested and jailed in 1872 and again in 1873 for having the audacity to vote. She argued that women should have the same rights afforded to black men under the 14th and 15th Amendments. She did not live to see it, but the 19th Amendment to the Constitution giving women the vote would never have been passed without her courageous efforts. Of course, I am inclined to agree with those who say that if God had meant for women to vote, God would have given us some decent candidates.

Rosa Parks plopped down on a bus on December 1, 1955 after a long day working as a seamstress. When bus driver James Blake demanded she give up her seat to a white man, she politely refused. She was arrested and went to trial. Rosa Parks sat down, and the whole world stood up. Sometimes rules beg to be broken.

John Akers would agree. Dressed in blue jeans and a tattered T-shirt, John walked into a bank to finalize a business transaction. The teller told him that the officer he needed to see was not in, so he would have to come back the next day. He said OK, and asked the teller to validate his parking ticket. The teller informed him that, according to bank policy, she could not validate his parking ticket because he had not completed a financial transaction. John asked for an exception, since he had come to the bank intending to do make a transaction, but could not because the appropriate officer wasn't in. The teller didn't budge. She said, "I'm sorry; that's our policy. Rules are rules." John decided that he would make a business transaction after all--he closed his account. Since he was the chairman of IBM, the account he closed that day had a balance of 1.5 million dollars. This qualified as a financial transaction and the teller was forced to finally validate the parking ticket.

It is good to know the rules, but equally as important to know the

exceptions to the rules, and when they should be broken. Paul and Silas also demonstrate how to:

Stay focused upon God no matter what

Problems and setbacks are going to pursue all of us in life. I don't know how it is with you, but problems tend to hit me first thing in the morning. Sometimes before my feet hit the floor, I am thinking about the many challenges that have to be dealt with that day. This is not the best way to get things started. Problems are temporary. They get solved and go away, and like a revolving door, new ones will always come along to take their place.

As spiritual people, we need to direct our first thoughts of the day not to the problems themselves, but to the one who empowers us to handle them. Our focus needs to be upon God, not the dilemmas before us. No matter what struggles you're facing right now, uncertainty, anxiety, fear, loss, bereavement, immerse yourself in God's healing presence. Draw on God's strength, let him fill you with the faith and determination you need. Trust in God, and God will direct your paths. Even in a prison cell, Paul and Silas are singing. Singing! They were praising God, because they gave God their attention, not their problems. Thomas Merton, monk and author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, said that his advice for daily living was to "Be good, keep your feet dry, your eyes open, your heart at peace, and your soul in the joy of Christ."

Finally, place service above self

Paul and Silas could have easily escaped after that earthquake, but they stayed to help their jailer, risking not only their freedom but their very lives. They saw an opportunity to help a fellow human being and they seized that opportunity. In the end they were free anyway, and got everything they needed. The happiest people on earth are those who refuse to get all wrapped up in themselves, who look for opportunities to help others.

For most of his life Albert Einstein had the portraits of two scientists, Newton and Maxwell, hanging on his wall as role models to inspire him. Toward the end of his life, however, he took them down and replaced them with portraits of Albert Schweitzer and Mahatma Gandhi. As he got older he needed new role models, he said -- not of success, but of humble

service. Jesus teaches us that there is no true success in life without sacrifice and service.

Those lessons from Paul and Silas are relevant for us all: look for the positive in all circumstances, know which rules to keep and which rules to break, stay focused upon God and not your problems, and place service above self.

If we can do those things, at least some of the time, we will not only be smarter than a fifth grader, but much happier too.