



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Random Acts of Prison Breaks

Text: Acts 5:12-26

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September 24, 2006

This starts out as something of a fun story.

Following the whole endeavor with Ananias and Sapphira there is a heavy feeling to what is going on in the early church.

Then the preaching and miracles begin to take place.

Then the apostles are arrested for preaching and performing miracles.

The apostles are put in prison.

And then there is the first of several random acts of prison breaks which take place in Acts of the Apostles. An angel of the Lord frees the apostles and they go back to preaching.

And the leadership of the Jews call for the prisoners to make an example of them, only to find out that the prisoners are no longer in preaching, but out there, once again, performing miracles and preaching about Jesus.

The apostles are doing what God wanted them to do and God is seeming to make an announcement to the world that no one was going to get in the way.

There is a theme in both the Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles. The world is going to be turned upside down.

If you recall, in the Gospel of Luke, there is a song of Mary, the Cantic of Mary and she says:

*He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.*

*He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
he has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent away empty.*

You might ask what sort of world is this, where the proud are scattered, the mighty are tossed from their thrones, the poor become rich and the rich become poor? This is the view of the Kingdom of God from the perspective of Luke. A world where the status quo is turned upside down.

And we see this play out in this story.

There was much commotion about one lame man healed at the gate of the Temple. But things changed. Now those healings and miracles were happening one right after another. Luke tells us that even to stand in Peter's shadow in faith was enough to get a person healed.

And there was a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm amongst everyone because they saw God working in their midst.

But not everyone. And this is where things get ironic.

The leaders of the Jews, the most highly educated, best trained, most knowledgeable people in the world about the ways of God don't get it. And it's worse than just not getting it; they are jealous. To use Luke's exact words, "They were filled with jealousy."

They were filled with jealousy.

They were jealous because the apostles were getting more acclamation than they were, and they were the more privileged rank.

They were jealous because it looked like God was working with the apostles more than them and they were the priests in the Temple who everyone should have been respecting and admiring more.

They were jealous that the message of the apostles was changing the lives of people whereas they were just doing what they had always done and no one's life was being changed at all.

There were some problems here. The first had to do with perceptions about God.

The God of the Sadducees and the Pharisees was a harsh God. They believed, at their

core, that God was harsh and judgmental and, frankly greedy. God wanted people to follow strict rules in their day to day lives, offer sacrifices, and God was just there.

There was no idea of hope. There was no idea of grace. There was no idea of eternal life. There was no idea that God loved anyone. You lived your life under a cruel, divine task master, and then died.

And then the apostles come along and begin saying, “No, that’s not really what God is like.”

God, they said, is loving. God is not a cruel task master, but a loving Father longing for His lost children to come home.

God, they demonstrate, has this awesome, almost unthinkable love to share with the world.

And this idea that God was a loving God was, in so many ways, frightening to the Sadducees. To be honest and real, it can be frightening to us as well.

Most Christians, if you took a poll and asked if they believed the doctrine that God loved them would say yes, they believe God loves them. Doctrinally we don’t have an issue with that.

However, if you asked the same people the question phrased in a different way and asked if people **allowed** themselves to really feel God’s love, and people were honest, most would say that they’ve never really allowed themselves to **feel** the love of God in their lives. Believing that God loves us, on an intellectual basis, is pretty easy. But to allow ourselves to feel God’s love is a whole other story.

And, down deep, most of us have a hard time feeling this because we know our own weaknesses way too well. We can all think of 1001 reasons for God not to really love us.

And this was an issue for the Jewish leadership of that day----their concept of God was as a stern task master and God was ‘out there’ calling the shots and they simply could not let themselves feel the love of God. And it was an obstacle for them in understanding God and anyone running around telling about God’s love and revealing God’s love by doing great works in their midst was downright frightening. The jealousy of the Sadducees was a jealousy born of great fear. They were afraid of God’s love.

But, it even when a step further. Even if we can embrace that God loves us, even if we can feel God’s love for us, somewhere along the line we begin to believe that, on some level, something we have said or something we have done has earned us God’s love.

We, theologically, speak about grace as saying that God's love is undeserved and unmerited, but, much the same as allowing ourselves to feel the love of God, we cannot quite let go of the belief that there was something we did or said or professed that gave us the privilege of being loved by God.

This was the second issue of the Sadducees. They were the high priests, they were people who were highly regarded, educated, highly trained, highly respected among people. If God was going to love **anyone**, they had to be God's first choice. They deserved it more than the people on the street who were clamoring to get into Peter's shadow.

It still happens. The one message of Christianity which people often resist more than any other message is the message of hope. We just can't believe that God is that good, that generous, that loving. Someone needs to be left out.

Over the years Christians have tried to define grace. And most of our attempts to define grace and different kinds of grace are ways to limit grace and, ultimately demonstrate that grace is something some people are entitled to for some reason. Much like the love of God.

The problem is, if you keep going back to the Bible and reflect on what grace really is, grace is totally, absolutely, and definitively undeserved and unearned. There is nothing we can do which entitles us, in any way, to receive God's grace.

Yet we do receive it because God's grace is God's love and it is a gift from God merely because God loves us.

The only reasonable example, and it is an imperfect example, is how parents love their children. Parental love is undeserved. Parents love their children despite the fact that their children may be difficult, may not behave, may not live up to expectations. Parents just seem to, no matter what, love their children. Of course, this isn't true of everyone and the example can break down as we know that there are parents who don't love their children. But, for so many parents, that parental love is something they give just because these people are their children.

And we are God's children and God loves us. That's pretty much it. No matter what we do, no matter what we say, we can't change that for ourselves or anyone else. God loves us just because.

And that was the second root of the problem with the Sadducees. Even if they could get their hands around God loving them, they just could not let go of the belief that if God really did love them, they were somehow entitled to that love. They earned that love.

We can focus so much in this story of random prison breaks, apostolic miracles, bold preaching, the jealousy.

I think, however, in the core of the story, we need to reflect on the jealousy of the Sadducees. They are a people to grieve for.

Their God is a harsh God, a judgmental God, a rigid taskmaster.

And they cannot let go of that and allow God to love them or the rest of the world.

And they who are the most powerful people in this story are the one's we truly need to learn to grieve for, for they have missed what God is truly about.