

First Sunday after Epiphany, January 7, 2018
Acts 16:25-34
The Crucial Response to the Crucial Question
Rev. George Ferch

Dear friends in Christ Jesus,

The meat of any religious discussion hangs on the bones of many questions. Those questions do not hold equal weight. They are good questions, if the asker really wants to know, but not all are crucial to the discussion. Could we not, then, say the same about the responses? Some are crucial others not so much. By crucial I mean essential.

What are some of the questions we hear when, like Peter says, we are ready to “give the reason for the hope that we have?” [1 Peter 3:15] They might include, What is the difference among the Lutheran synods? Why didn’t Pastor Smith bury my aunt’s second cousin? What does it matter where I worship, aren’t all churches the same? You likely have your favorites. Good questions all that deserve an answer. However, they are not crucial nor are our responses.

Today is the observance of the Baptism of our Lord. The Father anointed his eternal Son, now also a human being, with the Holy Spirit and with power. Jesus would begin his public redemption of us sinners as the Christ, the Anointed One, with whom his Father is well pleased.

In any religious discussion, Jesus’ redemptive work is the meat. In connection with Jesus’ redemptive work, among all the peripheral questions and responses, there is the crucial response to the crucial question. Take a look with me at **The Crucial Response to the Crucial Question**. The crucial question is what must I do to be saved. The crucial response is believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul and Silas had driven a demon from a slave girl who had been telling fortunes. Her income had gone to her masters. Now the income was gone so her masters had the magistrates throw the disciples into prison. This happened in Philippi in northern Greece early in Paul’s Second Missionary Journey around 49-50 AD.

A miraculous earthquake freed the disciples and others as they prayed and sang in the middle of the night. This earthquake not only freed them but put the fear of God, literally, into the jailer’s heart. This man was no fool who said in this heart there is no god. He knew there is a god. He feared death when he would have to face that god. This death would come by his own hand fearing his prisoners had escaped. This was his punishment according to Roman law.

After Paul and Silas assured the trembling jailer “We are all here,” the jailer asked the crucial question. It is the essential question everyone needs to ask as they face the “dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” [Hebrews 10:31] “What must I do to be saved?”

No one had to convince the jailer he needed saving. His guilty conscience and natural knowledge of God assured him of the grim reality that “the soul that sins shall surely die.” [Ecc. 18:4]. The jailer knew he had earned the wages of sin, death. In his hopelessness, he wrongly thought there was something he could do to get off the path toward self-murder and eternal punishment staring him in the face. The jailer wanted rescue from standing before the God whose power had put him into this fearful condition.

God continues to use his power in nature to put the fear of death into our hearts. A guilty conscience condemns us on account of our transgression of a single commandment. The very thought of standing before the holy God in our sins fills us with more dread than having to stand

naked and ashamed before a human judge who holds in his hands the evidence of our guilt, and the verdict of our deaths.

The jailer's question is the crucial question. In our lives, the awareness of our sins and our sense of guilt are beneficial because they lead us to ask it. In our lives as witnesses to others, it is important that we get others to come to the same realization of sin and guilt so they ask it. Or, recognize when they are there and be ready with the crucial response.

All other questions about faith and religion and spirituality are interesting. They are worthy of an answer when sincere. The crucial question is what must I do to be saved? Then, we give the crucial response believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

With a word Paul and Silas changed the jailer's life and gave him a new eternity. I should say with "the Word" the disciples in love called this lost soul out of the darkness of hopeless and misguided self-focus to faith and hope in Jesus Christ. This is what we call the gospel imperative, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved- you and your household." This is the crucial answer to the crucial question.

The offer of salvation was not for him alone but for all his family. In order for them to believe in the name of the Lord Jesus the jailer and his family had to hear about Jesus. The jailer needed faith and faith comes through hearing the Word of Christ. "Then they took the Word of the Lord to him and to all others in his house."

Now the jailer had a hopeful view of his future. CFW Walther, the father of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod said in a devotion that the Word of God is the telescope into the heart of the heavenly Father. Through the telescope of the Word the jailer and then his family saw God's love for them in the Lord Jesus Christ. They saw their future life in heaven with the true God through the forgiveness of their sins.

How does the Holy Spirit saves us through faith in Christ? The Holy Spirit creates faith as the hand that holds the perfect obedience Jesus rendered to the commandments. Faith is the saving trust that Jesus's suffering and death on his cross made full payment to God for our sins and guilt. The Holy Spirit saves us through Christ as he causes us to cast aside our own deadly righteousness and put on the garments of Jesus' blood and righteousness.

The jailer's new faith changed him from cruelty and indifference toward prisoners to love and compassion for brothers in Christ. "the jailer took them home and washed their wounds...he set a meal before them." Paul and Silas baptized the jailer and all his family. After the Holy Spirit brings a sinner to faith in Christ through the Word, the sacrament of Holy Baptism is the pledge of a good conscience before God that forgives sins for the strengthening of the believer's faith.

As quickly as this unnamed man appears on the pages of Holy Scripture he is gone. We do not know what happened to him after he followed his officers' order the next morning to release Paul and Silas. St. Luke does tell us one thing. "He was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God-he and his whole family."

I can think of a couple situations very much like this in my ministry. This is the goal of our personal evangelism and support of our congregation's and synod's mission efforts. It is about one crucial question and one crucial response. What is essential for all people is to be saved. God has saved all people at Christ's cross. Now it is our privilege as Christ's voice to tell all people that good news that is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. Amen. <SDG>