

They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.

*Acts 16:32*

### **Speaking in Tongues and Actions**

This coming Sunday is Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' followers to become what we now know as the Christian Church. The sign of the Spirit's impact is their ability to speak in the native languages of all the Jews who were present. Interestingly, this power enabled the disciples to proclaim the gospel to all peoples—yet to others, it sounded like they were all drunk! Even with the different spoken languages covered, not everyone was being reached.

Of course, there are other ways to communicate. There was mention in Colossians 3:17 that “whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Certainly Jesus communicated through actions such as healing and miracles, as well as through metaphor and parable.

Today, communication has been facilitated by technology, but this has also added some complexity. We are presented with so many choices of communication channels that it is almost impossible to reach everyone, certainly with any one means. So there was a time when the spoken word was the only way to announce something. Then there was the written word, delivered by hand. Then there were messengers, and the postal service, and the telegram and telephone and even fax. Nowadays, we need to decide whether to use email, social media (Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/TikTok etc., using other languages such as images and video), and then we have various texting apps, websites, smartphone apps, etc. etc. How many of you send messages out over multiple channels, or text someone to ask them to look for and respond to an email you sent?

The many ways to communicate are chosen based on speed, breadth, but mostly effectiveness—how well are you able to get your point across, and how memorable is your message?

The snippet above from Acts comes from yesterday's lectionary passage, Acts 16:16-34. It's quite the story, including God's special effect of an earthquake to break open the jail where Paul and Silas were being detained. But the most effective message of the grace of Jesus Christ was very quiet. Though the prisoners could have escaped after the earthquake destroyed the prison, Paul and Silas did not leave. If they had escaped, the jailer would have been blamed, so in his distress, he thought to kill himself. Yet Paul yelled out that he need not hurt himself, because they were still in the prison!

This unusual act, to choose to stay in a prison even after exit was made possible, and further to show compassion to the man who imprisoned them, was surely the most effective communication. It surely got the message across to the jailer, who fell to his knees in gratitude, asked how he could be saved, brought the prisoners into his own home to care for them, and presented himself and his whole family to be baptized.

Lately, church leaders have struggled to figure out how to respond to issues in our society. An issue that has come up repeatedly is how to help North American Christians assess public policy in light of the gospel, and how to confront threats being made against the most vulnerable people in our society. Immigrants—or even people who just look like immigrants—are being deported to other countries, and people who are helping them are being threatened with arrest. The elderly are worried about their income or medical benefits being cut. Women with complications in their pregnancies cannot find adequate medical care. And members of the LGBTQ community are at risk of losing the rights that protect their safety and allow them to live more fully as God calls them.

There has been a fear that churches should not speak about “politics.” This fear may reflect a desire for institutional self-survival more than obedience to the gospel. Pastors don’t want to get criticism or lose members by addressing controversial matters. Church leaders worry about maintaining their tax-exempt status. And churches are becoming the target of anonymous threats.

But the Bible is filled with people of God speaking out against injustice and corruption in the world. Old Testament prophets often addressed government officials and their policies of international relations and conflict, taxation, and care for the poor. And yes, they were punished for their truthfulness. Jesus himself suffered at the hands of corrupt officials. And again, Paul was thrown into prison in the midst of his first mission trip to Europe.

As people of faith, we are always confronted with the question of how to live as citizens of God’s realm, even as we live in this world. As ambassadors of Christ, we are called to follow Christ’s command to care for the most vulnerable among us (“the least of these”), and to communicate to all the hope we know thanks to Jesus’ sacrifice. And because it is the unusual action that gets our attention, our efforts to care for immigrants, honor and protect the elderly and children, and welcome and respect queer people will be as effective a message as any about God whom we worship.

The lesson from Acts 16:23-34 is to go one step further, and that is to show compassion even for those who would oppress us.

This is hard work, and it takes great faith in God’s protection and gratitude for Christ’s great love—and, of course, the Pentecost power to communicate most effectively the good news we know in Jesus Christ. As we celebrate the birthday of the Church, may we accept the power of the Holy Spirit to be Christ’s body for this time and place.

In peace,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Wendy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.