

The Power of Your Story
Preparing People to Hear Your Story
Acts 16:8-34

Dr. Steve Horn

October 28, 2012

Text Introduction: We have been in a series of messages on the Power of Story—not just any story, but the story of God’s activity in our lives. We are beginning to wind down. We will conclude next Sunday with a final message for this series. Our purpose has been to see specific principles from the New Testament as individuals shared the message of Jesus. We turn our attention this morning to Acts 16 and the topic, “Preparing People to Hear Your Story.” I will begin in verse 9-12, but keep your Bibles open to this chapter as we consider three specific examples of “Preparing People to Hear.”

Text: ⁹ During the night a vision appeared to Paul: A Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, “Cross over to Macedonia and help us!” ¹⁰ After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to evangelize them.

¹¹ Then, setting sail from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony, which is a leading city of that district of Macedonia. We stayed in that city for a number of days.

Introduction: In recent years, I have heard several leaders of our denomination make a statement something like this: “The Church is a harvest driven entity in a seedless generation.” The statement is meant to awaken us to that practical fact that before we can expect a harvest, we must first plant seeds of the Gospel. There is absolutely no doubt that the statement is true. As I studied this text in Acts 16, I found myself wondering if the situation is not even more disastrous. Not only is this generation seedless, we, the Church, have not even plowed the ground. This text today is about plowing the ground. That is, this text causes us to focus on preparing people to hear the Gospel. Are there things that we can do as individuals and as a Church to prepare people to hear the Gospel? I believe this text reinforces that there is something that we can do.

The sixteenth chapter of Acts is a description of Paul’s ministry to Phiippi. We know of this city because our New Testaments contain a short little letter that Paul wrote to the Christians there. That letter is of course called Philippians. Philippi, as the text describes, was a leading city of the region. As such, it became a strategic place for the Gospel to be planted. In Paul’s ministry to this city, we see some specific strategies—some planned, some spontaneous—that prepare the hearts of the Philippians to receive the Gospel. These strategies are useful to us as we seek ways to “prepare people to hear the Gospel.

How do we prepare people to hear the Gospel?

Engage the Community as often as possible(13-15)

¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we thought there was a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. ¹⁴ A woman named Lydia, a dealer in

purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

The first way that Paul prepared people for the Gospel was meeting them right where they were. Understand that these of this prayer meeting were not believers in Christ. Probably, these women gathered for prayer, were individuals often described historically as God-fearers. They were Gentiles by birth, believing in the religious claims of Judaism. The point is that of priority for Paul is that he knows where to go, and he went. He engaged the community.

In preparing people for the Gospel, we must engage the community. We must be constantly looking for ways to engage the community. What interests the people that you would like to influence toward Christ?

This is one of the strategies behind the Singing Christmas Tree. People are interested in Christmas. We have to find multiple ways to meet people where they are.

One of things that blesses my soul as a pastor is when I see grandparents seated with their grandchildren at our 11:11 service. They may not be all that interested in the style of worship at 11:11, but they are interested in their grandchildren.

Expose the Culture as necessary(16-24)

¹⁶ Once, as we were on our way to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit of prediction. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ As she followed Paul and us she cried out, "These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the slaves of the Most High God." ¹⁸ And she did this for many days.

But Paul was greatly aggravated and turning to the spirit, said, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out right away.

¹⁹ When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. ²⁰ Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews ²¹ and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice."

²² Then the mob joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had inflicted many blows on them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to keep them securely guarded. ²⁴ Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

This second vignette of Paul's activity in Philippi deals with a certain girl who has a "spirit of prediction." What she said looked right, but it was not right. Paul was "aggravated." Scholars suggest that she was more than likely bringing confusion to their message. In a setting that celebrated a plurality of gods, her following them could have added confusion to the exclusivity of their message about Christ.

The important thing that we see is that there came a time when Paul had to confront this problem—confront this sin. He had to expose the sinful culture. That’s the lesson for us. At times, we engage the community (the culture); at other times, we must expose the culture.

I fear that the church has mightily struggled in these first two areas. Often times, I fear we lean too heavily in one direction or the other. We engage the community so much that the community influences us instead of our influencing the community. On the other hand, I fear that we too arrogantly and maybe even at times too quickly, and certainly too harshly point out the sin of culture. We need balance, and we need wisdom. Paul let it go for several days, but then he exposed the culture. (18) God, give us that kind of wisdom.

Pray for Wisdom to find the balance!

Exalt Christ always(25-34)

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

²⁸ But Paul called out in a loud voice, “Don’t harm yourself, because all of us are here!”

²⁹ Then the jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he escorted them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ So they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the message of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. ³³ He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had believed God with his entire household.

The last scene deals with Paul and Silas’ prison praise. In the book of Acts, Christians are always filled with hope. Here, Paul and Silas are singing and praising God even in the midst of pain.

Music has a way of doing that. “Songs help truth travel down to the heart, and the use of music, the language of the heart, helps speed the process.” (John Polhill, NAC on Acts)

Never underestimate the power of worship to draw people to God. After hearing the Paul and Silas praise God in the midst of their crisis, the jailer was ready to respond when it came to his own crisis.

Two Important Closing Thoughts

People are always watching.

God is always working. This text begins with God calling Paul and Timothy to Philippi. Once there, among the first persons they met was a woman named Lydia.

Conclusion: These principles point us to how to pray for unbelievers. Pray for them to be exposed to Christ followers. Pray for them to be convicted by sin. Pray for them to encounter real worship. Pray that God will be working in their lives.