

Preachable Moments

Philippians 1:12-18 (NIV)

¹² Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³ As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴ And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear. ¹⁵ It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶ The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸ But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

You've probably heard the term "teachable moment" before, but what exactly is that? One person described it this way: "A teachable moment is an unplanned opportunity that arises in the classroom where a teacher has a chance to offer insight to his or her students...a fleeting opportunity that must be sensed and seized by the teacher. Often it will require a brief digression that temporarily sidetracks the original lesson plan so that the teacher can explain a concept that has captured the students' attention." Basically, you take a moment that wasn't planned to engage your student's motivated interest, but it comes at the cost of others things you also need to teach.

The Apostle Paul had plans, big plans. He was out there, traveling the world, planting churches, checking up on them, correcting them. He wanted to go to Rome, Spain, as far as he could go with the message of Jesus Christ. He wanted to share with people God who changed his life - that once he was one trying to destroy the Church but now he is one ready to lay his life down in order to progress the building of the Church. He showed people how this Jesus Christ of Nazareth was not just a man but also God at the same time. He showed people how their sins, their acts of disobedience, alienated them from God, sentenced them to eternal death in hell, that no one could ever work long enough or hard enough to meet God's standard of perfection. But he also showed them Jesus who lived perfectly for all people, experienced hell for all, died for all to pay mankind's debt of sin without any thought or expectation to pay him back. Paul shared with people a Christ who gave him contentment in all situations because God had made him a citizen of heaven. Paul shared God who gave him hope in the most hopeless situations.

And they put him in jail for it – bound him with chains. Paul had done nothing illegal; he had only preached Christ and what Christ had done for him and for the whole world. This was enough for others to keep Paul in prison for years. At the time of writing this letter to the Philippian Christians, Paul was no longer able to move around freely. He couldn't travel and plant more churches. His mission had come to a halt. Would he ever get out of this? Would they actually execute him this time? Would the preaching of Christ stop?

Although we should never have to experience our pastor being locked up for preaching Christ in our country, as the church we know those moments of discouragement when it comes to believing the message of Christ. We schedule a work day to beautify the Lord's house, rake leaves, hang drywall, paint, but fewer people than you thought show up. People who said they would come don't. Isn't the Lord's house a priority to them? Pastor schedules a special evening Bible class looking forward to teaching people God's Word, but 15 minutes past the scheduled start time and he concedes that no one is coming. Don't they want to learn more about God and all the wonderful things he has done for them? We agree to provide lunches for people who are coming to proclaim Jesus Christ in our area, but the donations for that lunch that come in are only half of what is needed. Don't people here want Jesus preached to our neighbors? Less people are in church this Sunday compared to last Sunday. Where are those people? Don't they love Jesus enough to spend their Sunday morning here? Situations weigh heavy on your mind – financial stress, mounting health problems, growing family drama. So, you took it to the Lord in prayer. Here you are on a Sunday morning. "I came for you, God. Why haven't you answered my prayer yet, helped me like you promised to?" What are we supposed to do when it looks like believing in Christ is in danger, that maybe this congregation will cease and Christ will no longer be preached? Should we just put on happy faces and pretend like none of these things are happening? Do we concede that we failed? That God failed?

Paul knew that some of the Philippian Christians were tempted to lose heart over the fact that he was in chains for preaching the Gospel. And so he sees an opportunity to proclaim Christ to them – a preachable moment, a moment where he can capture his flock's attention and show them something great about God, to encourage them in the midst of discouragement. So he writes, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel." (verse 12)

“What are you talking about Paul? You’re in chains. You can’t move around freely. How is your imprisonment advancing the Gospel – the Good News of what Jesus Christ has done for us?” Paul explains: “Because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.” (verse 14) Other Christians are daring to preach Christ because Paul has had opportunity to show his fellow Christians that he himself is not discouraged with this imprisonment, that he still believes the message of Christ will continue on. As these people come to visit him and he shares that Christ is with him, that God will deliver him because Christ gave his perfect life, his sacrificial death, and his resurrection for Paul and for the world. A Paul shares this with those who visited him, the palace guard and others involved with his trial also hear the good news of a perfect Savior who died for their sins to give them eternal life with God. Christ is preached! People know the salvation that comes only from God! People are daring to preach Christ because Paul is in prison and cannot preach and teach the way that he used to. They preach Christ because they are willing to lose everything for Christ the way Paul has, because they too have a citizenship in heaven.

“But, Paul, have you heard what they are saying about you? They mock you for what you preach. Others are out there saying that you got what you deserved. Other preachers are saying that they are better than you because they’re not in prison. This is not right, Paul. You should be out there preaching Christ.” Paul answers: “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” (verse 18) Paul doesn’t care that they put him down while he is in prison for preaching Christ because when they talk about him they have to explain what he is preaching in order to make fun of it. In this way, Christ is still preached even by people with evil, envious intent. Paul only cares that Christ is preached, no matter if this preaching comes seemingly at Paul’s expense. Paul’s chains made for a preachable moment. Still in chains, Paul proclaims God to anyone who will listen as the God who still continues to work all things for our good, even through the disappointments and seeming set-backs.

We too get preachable moments out of disappointments and seeming set-backs. There was one time back when I was studying to be a pastor when I went on a day trip to Chicago to do some door to door outreach for one of our churches there. I remember it not being the greatest neighborhood. So, my friend and I getting stopped by two officers in a squad car, probably because they thought we were trying to buy drugs or something. My friend and I took that moment to tell the officers that we wanted to share Jesus with the people here, that he forgave them and saved them just like us. We talked for about ten minutes before they let us go. As soon as the police left, a couple people from the neighborhood came up to us and said, “The popo bothering you?” We now had another preachable moment, an opening to tell them about Jesus and what he had done for them. We preached Christ to them and invited them to church. Getting stopped by the police officers looked like a set-back, but it served to advance the Gospel as we seized not one but two preachable moments – one to the officers, another to those in the neighborhood.

There are many things that can discourage us, things that make us feel like God’s Gospel is just getting ignored and isn’t effective, that evil is overcoming this world. But in these moments of disappointment, God gives us preachable moments to proclaim him and what he has done for all people. Not as many people turned out for a work day as you would have hoped, as you thought, but thank God for the people who did show up, who gave their Saturday morning, who gave their energy to beautify the Lord’s house, that you got to build a relationship with them that you hadn’t before and now you share that with the person you are here worshiping with today. Not as many people came to church this Sunday as last? Ok, but thank God for the people who did come whether they came for a good reason or a bad reason, because they wanted to or because they felt obligated to. They got to hear Christ and receive much needed forgiveness just like you. No one came to that special Bible class, but then you find out this person was helping friends and family and another was reading their Bible at home. You didn’t get as many donations for that lunch you wanted for those missionaries, but look at how generously your brothers and sisters in Christ were with what they did give. Your prayer was not answered in the way you hoped, in the way you asked, but God is still good to you, still giving you everything you need. And you get to share how God’s unconditional love for you still stands and gives you hope, hope that God has paradise waiting for you because Jesus took away your sins? Wind destroyed a significant chunk of our building two years ago. We’ve gotten many chances through that to share our church and Christ who is preached here with contractors, architects, handymen, and our neighbors. One member shared his concern with me that our building in disrepair was keeping people away. I got to tell him, “No. In fact, people keep coming.” Wind didn’t stop Christ and what he did for us. Christ is still preached. More people come. More people are washed clean of their sins through the holy waters of Baptism. That damage has given us so many more preachable moments.

When things don’t go as planned, especially as a church, it’s tempting to call it a set-back and get discouraged. Through Paul’s words while he was in chains, we know that these set-backs are prompts for a preachable moment: a time to share Christ instead of falling into discouragement. Seek those preachable moments and seize them because “the important thing is that in every way Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” (verse 18) And we rejoice with Paul through these preachable moments. Amen.