

The Prisoner's Friends

Trinity Sunday

Introduction

As we continue our Wesleyan Vile-tality series, we go back to the years before Bristol, when Wesley and a small group of Oxford students spent most of their time in the prisons of Oxford, among people the rest of the city preferred to forget. They called themselves the Holy Club. Others called them Bible Moths, Sacramentarians, and eventually, Methodists. This last word first appeared in print because of the stir they caused. In our text this week, Luke frames Jesus' mission as good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom for the oppressed. The author of the letter to the Hebrews makes it concrete: remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them. The Holy Club lived this out meaningfully.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTILMISq3U8>

In this clip from *Just Mercy* (2019), Bryan Stevenson visits Walter McMillian on death row. Walter wants to know why a young lawyer would come to Alabama to take cases nobody will pay him for.

Why This Video?

Walter has been on death row long enough to stop expecting help. Lawyers have come and gone. So when Bryan Stevenson walks in and says he can prove Walter's innocence, Walter's first move is to test him. He's met Bryan's family, knows the basics of the case. What he doesn't know is Bryan. "Why are you doing this?"

Trust between people in unequal positions usually depends on professional credibility. You trust your lawyer because of the degree, the track record, the firm. Instead, this conversation is about a different type of expertise. Someone who grew up in a place the system routinely ignores understands being invisible in a way that no school could teach.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Walter has had lawyers before. When Bryan shows up, Walter's first instinct is to test him. When have you been in a situation where someone offered help and your first response was suspicion? What had happened before that made trust difficult?
2. Bryan doesn't answer Walter's question with his qualifications. He answers with where he grew up. When has someone's personal story changed how you saw them or how much you trusted them?
3. Bryan describes waiting for help after his grandfather was murdered and realizing no one was coming. When have you experienced a moment where you understood that the help you expected was not going to arrive? How did that affect you?
4. Bryan says, "I know what it's like to be in the shadows." When have you felt invisible to the people or systems that were supposed to serve you? Who, if anyone, eventually showed up?
5. Walter's response to Bryan's story is simple: "That's a pretty good reason." What do you think Walter heard in Bryan's answer that previous lawyers hadn't given him?
6. The conversation ends with "Let's get to work." What do you think changed between the beginning of the conversation and that moment? When have you had a similar turning point with someone, moving from doubt to partnership?
7. Bryan chose to come to Alabama and take cases nobody would pay him for. When have you made a choice that didn't make professional or financial sense because you felt called? What was your experience?

Luke 4:16-21 (CEB)

¹⁶Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. ¹⁷The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
¹⁹and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

²⁰He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. ²¹He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Hebrews 13:1-8 (NRSVue)

¹Let mutual affection continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them, those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for he himself has said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." ⁶So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper;
I will not be afraid.
What can anyone do to me?"

⁷Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Scripture Study Questions

1. What comes to your mind when you hear "mutual love"? When have you experienced it across differences (cultural, generational, or social)? What made that moment meaningful?
2. After his time in the wilderness, Jesus returns to Nazareth and reads from Isaiah: good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. Why do you think he chose this passage? What does this tell us about what he understood his calling to be?
3. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What is the importance of that claim in the context of his hometown synagogue?
4. Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them." What does it mean to remember someone's suffering as if it were your own? Who in your community might need that kind of remembering?
5. Why do you think hospitality to strangers is highlighted in verse 2? What might change in our practice of welcome if we genuinely believed we could be hosting angels?

6. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." What do you think that means? How does that truth help you evaluate what is most important in a changing world?
7. Jesus speaks of bringing good news, release, and recovery to those in need. How might you embody this message in your community? Think about specific people or situations where you could bring hope or assistance.

Additional (Optional) Questions

1. How does your faith influence your interactions with others? As a Christian, what are your priorities in life? Do you think all Christians share those priorities? Do different churches seem to inspire different priorities for how we live?
2. In the scripture reading, who had the power in the situation? What does it mean to have "true power" in a world that often links power to control?
3. Do you think most people are good or bad? Do you think you are generally good or bad? Why do you think that?
4. Do you act differently when you know someone is watching? Have you heard of churches that use this logic to inspire good behavior or encourage people to resist sin and temptation?
5. It's human nature for our personalities to be flexible. Who we are around our parents isn't always the same as who we are around our friends, coworkers, neighbors, or strangers. At the end of the day, what do you want to be known for? When someone talks about you to someone else, what do you want them to say about your true nature?
6. In your life, who or what seems to have power over you or your choices? How do you feel about that?
7. Some Christian traditions call God "omnipotent," which means "all powerful." Do you think that is true? Why or why not? Is it possible that God's power might be different than how we think about humans having power?

Weekly Action

This week, pray for someone you know who is going through something alone. Then ask yourself: is there a person in your life, your neighborhood, or your community who could use someone to show up for them? It doesn't have to be dramatic. A phone call, a visit, a meal, a note. Make a specific plan: who will you reach out to, and when? Follow through before the week is over, and share what happened with a trusted spiritual partner or your small group.

Prayer

God of yesterday, today, and forever, we praise you for your constant presence and faithful love. As your Spirit guided Jesus to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed, guide us to live out that same call. Open our eyes to see the needs around us; open our hearts to respond with grace. Fill us with compassion, courage, and creativity to love one another as you have loved us. Send us as messengers of your hope and peace. Amen.