

I. Intro:

A. Last Sunday's Bible story of Joseph, as told so well by junior high students, was literally a rags to riches story ...

1. Part of the story's power is in the huge extremes in life that God brought Joseph through, from a favorite son with a fancy coat, to near death and languishing in an Egyptian prison, and then all the way to second in command of a powerful kingdom ...
2. You could say that Joseph is a prime example of the use of contrasts in the Bible
3. Today I want us to get in touch with Contrasting feelings through melodrama and through two images I'm going to ask you to respond to

B. Let me explain what we're going to do

1. The paintings came from a preaching magazine ... I chose them because they're images that demonstrate contrasts:
 - a) between feeling of comfort vs. discomfort ...
 - b) things that are settling vs. unsettling
2. As for the melodrama, perhaps you recall productions you've attended where the acting is exaggerated and the play operates more on an emotional level than a thought-provoking level
 - a) You know, when the hero Dudley Do-right steps out on stage flexing his muscles and the audience all cheers, but when the villain Snidely Whiplash appears with a scowl, he's greeted with boos from the audience ...
 - b) I'll ask you to do something a bit tamer than that, responding aloud when I give hand signals –
 - (1) Thumbs up: relieved sigh "Aaaah!" ...
 - (2) Thumbs down: concerned "Uh oh!" ... *Practice*

II. Now let's try out exploring the contrasts in these paintings

A. First perspectives

1. Some of you will instinctively feel at home and comfortable in this village picture (*THUMBS UP*)
 - a) There's a lot going on ... possibility of anonymously



disappearing into the crowd, if you like to look at life from a comfortable distance

b) Or you may like this because a social picture of children, family and animals all in harmony is comforting to you

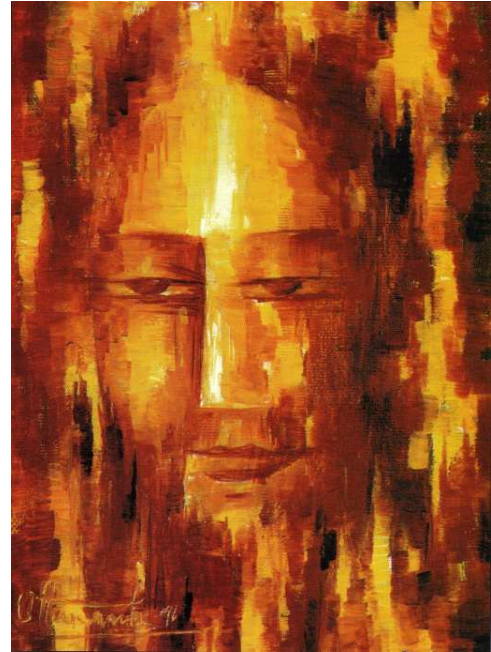
c) If you thrive in a diverse environment, then you’d enjoy the enrichment of a place like this village

2. On other hand, let’s check out a portrait of Jesus, painted by a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka ... some of you will find this picture of Jesus rather unsettling at first (*THUMBS DOWN*)

a) Its style is rather rough and scratchy

b) It may be too close and in-your-face, if you highly value your own personal space

c) Or maybe you were startled to see a Jesus with Asian features



B. What I described not the only possible contrast of perspectives

1. Some of you might actually find this Jesus to be a picture of settledness and security (*THUMBS UP*)

a) You may see love and gentleness in this face ...

b) Maybe painting encourages you to put aside your distractions and just revel in comfort of love of Jesus, especially if you’re one who values close relationships and intimacy

2. On other hand, some of you may find this village scene unsettling (*THUMBS DOWN*)

a) If you’re a loner or introvert or country person, you might say village scene is just too busy and too crowded

b) If you’re feeling overstressed or anxious today, picture probably has too many details, leaves you feeling more overwhelmed

c) If you’re used to seeing familiar faces around you, this might have you rubbing shoulders with too many strange-looking neighbors

C. Whether you like the image or not, I’ll leave it up a bit because our Scripture story with Paul and Lydia is set not in the serene countryside but in a major city ...

1. When you heard story, were you feeling more like this (*THUMBS DOWN*) or like this (*THUMBS UP*)?

III. Text is full of contrasts of comforting things (*THUMBS UP*) and unsettling things (*THUMBS DOWN*)... Has things that at first should make us feel more at ease, but in fact can be very unsettling [Will look at two contrasts in particular]

A. About who the gospel is for

1. This missionary journey of Paul chronicles the spread of Christianity from Middle East into Europe

a) Christianity spread from Asia Minor over to Europe through the efforts of Paul and Silas ... That fact may give us a settled feeling (*THUMBS UP*)



b) This new Christian movement was spreading fast ... Today's story records for us name of first Christian convert in Europe (in Philippi, specifically)

2. But let's say you were reading Book of Acts about 60 years after Jesus died. If you were an average Greek-speaking male, details of that conversion would have been unsettling (*THUMBS DOWN*) Why?

a) Very first European convert was a woman!

b) Why would this have been unsettling?

(1) Lydia was from Thyatira in Asia (*show on map*)

(2) She is introduced by her own name without ref. to a husband or father (a rare thing to do), and

(3) as a dealer in purple cloth, she was probably independently wealthy

3. This good news of Jesus was unsettling because it didn't follow the conventional wisdom about who was worthy to receive it ...

a) This story shows sharp contrast from who the Macedonian men would have expected as the first Christian convert in Europe

b) Remember Paul's vision? It was of a Macedonian *man* calling for their help

c) This good news was not limited to one homeland, nor to men only, nor to one ethnic group!

4. (Call a temporary "time out" with the melodrama)

B. Second contrast is about the nature of change ... do we welcome it or dread it?

1. Comforting, encouraging part for us was that gospel of Jesus Christ came to Lydia ... She found salvation!

a) Story says she was gathered with some Jewish women by the river, probably because there were not enough Jewish men in that city to form a synagogue, according to Jewish laws

b) Thanks to Paul and Silas and Timothy, she finally found fullness of life through Jesus of Nazareth, God's Son.

2. But following Jesus also meant changes for Lydia ... Following Jesus Christ brought unsettling new ideas and even risky behavior

a) She allowed—no, she invited—several strange men she had just met to stay with her ... in fact, she insisted and prevailed upon them ... *that's* a good way to get the local Philippian rumor mill buzzing!

b) Later in v. 40 it describes what Paul and Silas did after converting Philippian jailer and being released from jail

(1) implies that the first Christian community in Philippi met in Lydia's home ... a generous but risky thing to do

(2) Certainly a disruption of her private lifestyle ... Can you imagine guests from varied backgrounds gathering for worship one or more times a week in your own nicely kept house?

(3) Undoubtedly not all the new Christians in Philippi were as wealthy as she was ... for a single woman to be regularly entertaining both high-class and lower-class people, that may have had a negative impact on her business and reputation

3. Jesus Christ brought spiritual change for the better to Lydia, but he also brought behavioral transformation. Lydia's comfortable routines and way of life would never be the same.)

IV. These contrasts have some implications for us today:

A. Gospel is universal, not just for one gender or ethnic group

1. That means our thinking will be expanded about what "normal" Christianity looks like and sounds like

a) When someone starts talking about the Christian life with you, instinctively, what kind of visual picture comes to your mind?

(1) What is your "baseline" automatic image of Christianity? Is it of people who look and act much like you do?

(a) *(Forget the well-thought-out politically correct answer ... I'm trying to get at our instinctive, reflexive associations with Christian faith and practice)*

(b) If the Christian people we've known all our life look and think like we do, that tends to be our automatic image of who Christians are

(c) This story and many others in the New Testament challenge that assumption

b) If we believe that gospel is truly universal, then a white, middle-class, English-speaking pacifist from Germanic background is not the norm for what Christianity looks like ...

c) I am no more an example of a "normal" Christian than is Gilberto Perez or Pastor Sang Kun Lim and his family from Korea

2. So when we're in conversation with someone about what is a Christian response to difficult situations in our world, like immigration or dealing with terrorists, or setting national budget priorities, let's be cautious about using glib phrases like "the Christian thing to do is obviously ..."

a) You may strongly believe that it is obvious, but other Christians who do not look or think like you would disagree

b) The universality of the gospel calls for some humility from us when we make sweeping generalizations about what all Christians should do or believe

B. The contrast of the difference Jesus makes will also impact our lives:

1. This good news saves us from sin and death, but also shakes us up, with change and transformation

a) Becoming and remaining a faithful believer in Jesus Christ requires nothing of us at first, because God does the heavy lifting ...

b) and yet it requires everything of us, for Jesus doesn't want half-hearted commitments

2. *A real encounter with risen Jesus Christ cannot leave us exactly as we were before* ... may push us into risky, even unpopular behaviors:

a) Deliberately befriending neighbors/co-workers of a different social class or ethnic group, as Sharon Burkholder described

b) Refusing to go along with unethical requests or practices from your boss or business customers

Slowly over the last year of relating to Kirk Martin in jail, I've become more aware of the lives that are literally "lost" when inmates are released from jail into our local communities, but they have no support resources. Most of the time they quickly return to jail.

Texts: Acts 16:6-15

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Yet if local volunteers become "transitional coaches" who walk alongside an inmate struggling to reenter the local community, recidivism is greatly reduced. Jeff Miller of our congregation recently took part in training for "transitional coaching," and that will soon put him into direct contact with the messy life of a released inmate. I plan to take that training myself later this year, even though I could argue that I don't have time for it and it's none of my business helping criminals "make it" outside of prison. Perhaps a few more of you here today might join me ...

*When our fellow church member Kirk Martin returns to life in our community a few years down the road, will we be better prepared to walk with him in support **and** accountability? If so, that will feel like a risky "yes" to Jesus in our lives.*

V. Conclusion (Okay, time to be ready with our thumbs up and thumbs down)

A. Story of Lydia causes us to ask, "What does the church of Jesus Christ look like?"

1. One way to answer is to remind ourselves of this picture

a) What we see here is more how I believe God envisions the church: Different races and cultures, working and worshipping together

b) Good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, yet we confess that not many churches really resemble this image (*THUMBS DOWN*)



2. But this picture doesn't have to be an "uh-oh" image of the church ... excites me and give me hope when I look at it in a different way:

a) Every time we exchange visitors and prayer with BBI, we move closer to a church that looks like this. (*THUMBS UP*)

b) In August when we as a congregation have a summer festival in the spirit of Bluegrass on the Lawn, we will invite and engage with our neighbors ...

(1) and we'll do it not just so Waterford people can enjoy a nice social time and pat ourselves on the backs because we hosted an "outreach" event

(2) We'll do it so we have a chance to actually get to know some of those neighbors as neighbors, whether or not they come to our church

B. Story of Lydia also shows that encountering Jesus presents us with contrasting choices

1. Will we see a strange and scary Jesus haunting us with his calls for risky changes? (*THUMBS DOWN*) ...
2. Or will we see a friendly inviting Jesus whose sacrificial love for us is so powerful that we're willing to live transformed lives ... because we love him so much? (*THUMBS UP*)

C. Prayer:

1. *Lord Jesus, you come to us with a hopeful message of a challenging but joyful life in you, but too often our inner response to your call is "uh oh" ...*
2. *Through your Spirit, open and soften our hearts so that the opportunities you bring us will lead to dwelling with you in a posture of "aahhh"! Amen.*

