

Small Group Discussion ?

ACT OUT | LIVING WITNESSES
AUGUST 8-9, 2015 | ACTS 28:23a-31

Dear God, help us get uncomfortable. Amen.

[After they had set a day to meet with him,] they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter [of the kingdom of God to both Jews and Gentiles] to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets. Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe. So they disagreed with each other; and as they were leaving, Paul made one further statement: “The Holy Spirit was right in saying to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah, ‘Go to this people and say, You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.’ Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.

He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.



Living
Witnesses

UP with God

What is this story about?

For the first third of his life, Paul mercilessly persecutes the early Christians. He sends many followers of Jesus to prison, and even to their death. But that changes when Paul encounters the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul becomes utterly committed to Jesus, teaching and preaching about how the Kingdom of God is at hand for all people everywhere, with no exceptions. Paul proclaims how this new life empowers us to be the heart, hands and feet of Christ for all people in every place and in every age.

But not everyone agrees. Many insist that the unconditional, limitless, unreserved, all-encompassing love of God really does have conditions. Many believe this love is reserved only for a chosen few who think, believe, say, and do the right things. Many don't like Paul's message, so he spends the last two thirds of his life in trouble and in jail, persecuted himself.

Is that still true today? Pull out a newspaper or log on to social media and see who is being demonized, scorned, and kept on the “outside” today. Why is that happening? Have you ever noticed that those who insist God's love is only for a certain few are always part of that certain few? Why is that? Where is God's message of love and hope? What can we do about it?

Can you change your mind?

Imagine how difficult it would have been for Paul to change his mind so dramatically about such long-held convictions. How cold he go from persecuting Christians to joining them, even leading them?

How hard is it to admit that some things you desperately believe in might not be the way of God? How do you change your path like that? How do you know when you *should* change your path? Have you ever needed that sort of transformation? Do you need it now?

What is God really like? Do you ever stop to really think about who you worship and proclaim? Are you holding tightly to any convictions that stand against God's work in the world today? Are you ready to wrestle with all of that?

Is God really for everyone?

The story ends this way: “Paul ... welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.”

Was this a radical new thing? Is our normal human response to welcome everyone? Is this God really for everyone? Are we? Are you? Where do you find yourself in this story? How will you respond to it?

IN through community

How can you be a bold, unhindered church?

“Churches and ministries come in all shapes and sizes. On one end of the spectrum you’ve got churches where you can visit a cozy book store, a trendy coffee shop, and savvy internet cafe, all before checking your kiddos into a state-of-the-art ‘KidZone’ Sunday school class and heading off to an awesome worship gathering led by a rockin’ praise band before hearing a message from a hip pastor. On the other end, you can gather with just a few friends in a living room, a restaurant or even outside in a park, open the Bible, read it and ask together how the Spirit of God is calling your small group to be the hands and feet of Christ in that neighborhood. And there’s a lot of middle ground between these two. ...

“I’d simply like to ask you this question: What would it mean for you to walk boldly and unhindered as a living witness of Jesus Christ? How does that happen, what does that look like?” (– from Pastor Paul Gauche’s sermon notes)

How would your faith community answer that question? What would it look like for you all, as a church, to walk boldly and unhindered as a living witness of Jesus Christ?

What does your church look like? What does your church *live* like? Are decisions sometimes made for the comfort of the people already in the seats rather than the welcome of those who are not? Why? Are decisions sometimes made for the benefit or comfort of the stakeholders and donors? Why? Is that the world that Jesus creates? Is that the world that the apostle Paul advocates?

What would happen if your faith community dared to step into the discomfort of Paul’s later years, for the sake of the God that’s revealed in Jesus? What would that look like in your particular community? What do you need to give up, throw away, or change in order to live into God’s hope for the world?

Who is missing ?

Look around your congregation, small groups, church staff, and weekend worship. Who is not there? Why are they not there? Are there people in your community who have been marginalized, isolated, left out? Are there people in your community who might feel unwelcome at your church? Why?

Is there anything your faith community needs to do differently in order to change that? How can you become a welcoming community for all people, everywhere, with no exceptions?

Do you want to be that kind of a community? Would including some people make you feel uncomfortable? Why? Is it possible for that to change? How would Paul, with his life experience, answer that question? Can your heart change?

OUT for the world

How?

*“Sooner or later, everyone should be arrested and imprisoned for a good cause. Or if not arrested and imprisoned, put in a position of suffering and sacrifice. Or if not that, at least be criticized or inconvenienced a little. Because if we’re co-conspirators with the Spirit of God to bring blessing to our world, sooner or later it’s going to cost us something and get us in trouble.” (–from Brian McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking*)*

How has being a living witness, part of the movement of Jesus, impacted you? How has it challenged you? What would it mean for you personally to walk boldly and unhindered as a living witness of Jesus Christ? What does that look like in your life?

How do you find your path?

What won’t you stand for?

Because it was clear what the apostle Paul stood for, it was also clear about what he stood against: non-inclusion and the boundaries we create between us and others, for starters.

What do you stand for? What won’t you stand for? What injustice do you refuse to ignore? What makes you willing to be bold and unhindered?

What is it about the Kingdom of God that makes your heart pound? Do the things that make God’s heart glad make your heart glad? Do the things that break God’s heart break your heart, as well? How do you know breaks God’s heart, or makes God’s heart glad?

What if we fail?

Is there help for us as we step boldly and unhindered into the world? Will God help us? When we take a bold step, might God remove those things that hinder us?

And what if we do fail? Are there repercussions? Is that a reason not to try? Can we trust God? Is the unconditional love that we proclaim also for us? No matter what? Despite outcomes or results, success or failure? Despite our awkwardness or discomfort, despite our bad ideas or our good ones?

What is holding you back? What hinders you from taking that first step? What keeps you from being bold? What words of help or hope does the apostle Paul’s story as you step out as a living witness in the world today?