

## **Seventh Sunday of Easter May 29 2022**

### **Acts 16:16-34**

Bondage, being enslaved, can be explicit- handcuffs, bars, physical restraints on movement or communication. Often achieved through force. Someone in jail, under arrest, those forced to labor for another's benefit. But bondage can look an awful lot like freedom, can't it?

Addictions can be a prime example of this. Things that are often held up as signs of freedom- drinking alcohol, partying, sex, doing drugs- can all too quickly become something that we cannot live without- even when we want to. That bind us to acting in a certain way.

Our reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles raises the question, who in this story is enslaved and who is free? The slave-girl calls Paul and Silas slaves of the Most High God. But are they truly enslaved or free?

The girl with the spirit of divination isn't free- her powers mean she is a money-maker for those who own her, who would use her gifts for their gain. For those who were here for our Human Trafficking Awareness presentation on Tuesday, does that sound familiar?

What about the citizens of Philippi, where all this happened? Are they free or enslaved? These ones who were so easily stirred to violence when these rich men tugged on the chain of their prejudice and fear of outsiders – These Jews are coming here and stirring things up. Outside agitators.

Foreigners who don't really belong here. Many of these citizens are former Roman soldiers who were angered because these rich men told them- these Jews threaten your way of life! They are seeking to change what we hold dear! The very core values upon which this great republic is built and for which you fought.

The ironic thing is that these rich men could have taken Paul to civil court and sued him for their loss of income. Instead, they use the levers of prejudice and fear of the outsider who will change everything to stir up a violent response from the people and corrupt the judicial system to act in their interest, not the states. And certainly not the interest of the accused.

What about the magistrates? Are they free or enslaved? The ones who, on seeing the way the winds of the mob are blowing, endorse the abuse even though Paul and Silas had committed no crime. Who leave behind their sworn duty to uphold the law and instead are enslaved to their desire to appease the crowd, which really means doing the will of these rich men.

What about the jailer? Is he free or in bondage? Who is so distraught over what he thinks will happen, what he thinks the system will do to him and his family because the prisoners have escaped, that he is going to kill himself.

What about Paul and Silas? Slaves of the Most High God. Are they free or in bondage? Even as they were stripped and flogged with rods by the crowd. Thrown in jail. Huddled in the dark and cold. Wounds untreated. Perhaps with broken or bruised ribs, backs bleeding, legs locked in stocks

so they could not have hope of escape. Waiting in the dark for who knows what.

Who is free and who is enslaved? The crowd thinks they are free, but they are enslaved to their own prejudice and patriotism, stirred so easily by the lies of those who say they are only looking out for their good, the good of the state, but who are only looking out for their own financial interest. The magistrates think they are free but are enslaved to the will of the mob. The rich men think they are free but are enslaved to their money.

What are we in bondage to, my friends? What holds us captive, even if we can't see it? Our way of seeing things, money, power, politics? The injustice of a system? The inability to change?

The only truly free people in this story are Paul and Silas. Locked in the dark, bleeding, seemingly alone. And ironically enough, their freedom comes from being slaves to the Most High God. Belonging exclusively to God.

We held a prayer service on Wednesday to remember the 19 children and 2 adults murdered in their classroom in Uvalde, TX. You can find that service online and my own reflection there. Within that reflection I acknowledged that even I was getting to the point of believing that “thoughts and prayers” had become nothing but a meaningless platitude. A bandage put over a gaping wound just so that we could say we’ve done something and then quickly move on without actually trying to heal the wound.

I know that there are many who wonder what earthly good worship is. Especially in such moments. But also, because there is so much, better, more interesting, fun, productive things to do. Travel, sports, family. But there, in the dark, imprisoned, bloodied, and bruised Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God. In the face of the powers of the world; money, influence, violence, and oppression. They worship God.

What did they sing? Probably not *Our God is an Awesome God* or *As The Green Blade Rises*. Their songbook would have been the psalms. Perhaps it was psalm 16, which Paul quoted in Antioch. *“Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” “Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows...the Lord is my chosen portion and my cup...I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved...for you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.”*

In this unexpected response, worship in the face of the enslavement of the world to other powers, we see the faith which frees Paul and Silas. A faith that says that the powers of this world are nothing in the face of the power of God in Jesus Christ. That even bleeding, shackled, imprisoned with an uncertain future, they will pray to God and sing hymns in praise of God. That they are free in Christ. And nothing in this world can touch that.

And their witness does not go unnoticed. For there are others in the gloom with them. Others waiting uncertain of their future. Perhaps having been

beaten, awaiting trial. Those both guilty and innocent. Who overhear these prayers, who hear the confidence in the songs that they sing.

And that worship has the power to shake the very foundations of their oppression. To change things. Even in the midst of the darkest night. And the walls of all that enslaves them comes tumbling down and the doors fling wide open, the stocks are broken. They are free! Not just Paul, Silas and all those other prisoners. But things change for the one who had seemed free, the jailor, who was himself enslaved to this system of oppression. One whose life is literally saved.

Saved, because Paul, Silas and the others do not exercise their freedom at the expense of jailor but remain in their cells for his sake. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Galatians, it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Freedom not just for us but freedom to serve others. To release them from their captivity as well.

There is power in our worship, in the songs we sing, and the prayers we speak. Power to shake the very foundation of all that enslaves our world and our nation. A culture that divides into us and them. A culture that prizes the accumulation of wealth and power. A culture of violence and fear that seems to accept the death of nineteen nine- and ten-year-olds as the cost of freedom. A culture that blasphemes and uses scripture to market a weapon that is designed to kill other human beings.

I know in our Doubting Thomas questions there were many about the reality of evil in the world. One that showed itself so clearly on Tuesday,

earlier this month in a Buffalo grocery store, and in the 214 mass shootings so far in the US this year. (*Gun Violence Archive- foundation definition being that they have a minimum of four victims shot, either injured or killed, not including any shooter who may also have been killed or injured in the incident.*) The question of why God allows this. If God is so good. Why does God allow this?

My response is, why do you? Why do I? If we are indeed the visible sign of the Body of Christ in the world, why are we silent in the face of that which brings death and destruction? Why do we keep still? The call of Jesus, our Lord, our Master, is one that sets us in motion, action. Jesus is always on the move, and he tells us to GO! Feed. Comfort, Clothe, Heal, Resurrect. Faith is a verb. If our faith does not move us, Martin Luther would argue, it is no faith at all. But fantasy, an illusion we keep as a security blanket. Which ultimately does us and the world no good.

Our worship is powerful and dangerous, because in it we hear the word of God in Jesus Christ that speaks the truth. The truth that we are all in bondage and cannot free ourselves. That we all are susceptible to the levers of prejudice and patriotism. To being deceived by those who act for their own gain while telling us that they are acting for our good.

We are in bondage to violence and cannot free ourselves. Only God can do that. And we who are believers know it. So, we worship, for there is power there. We proclaim the psalm- "From where shall our help come? Our help comes from the Lord!" We sing our hymns! We receive a bit of bread and wine and when we believe it, when we bond ourselves to this

God who has loved us so much he sent his Son Jesus to die so that we might live, when we remind ourselves we are citizens of this kingdom first. Slaves to this infinite love. Then nothing can touch us, and nothing can stop us. Because we are free, indeed.

But- this power of God in Jesus is not something to be used to lord it over others. Instead, like Paul and Silas, we remain in the jail for the sake of others caught by the same bondage. Like Jesus, we sacrifice ourselves on the altar of the principalities and powers of this world that say they reign. So that others might be saved.

My siblings in Christ. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm then and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. In the midst of this darkness, let us turn our voices again in praise to the God who knows the awful pain of the death of a child, who loves us all with reckless abandon, and who in the resurrection of Jesus has freed us all from bondage to sin and death.

Then let us go into the world and speak, act, work, live, and proclaim that freedom to others, so that they too may be freed. And find life, true life in Jesus Christ.