

## **Seventh Sunday of Easter June 2 2019**

### **Acts 16:16-34 Gospel: John 17:20-26**

We have in our text from Acts today an illustration of what happens when the Kingdom of Heaven meets the Kingdom of the World.

The Kingdom of the World runs the way it does because it and we are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves. The Kingdom of the World runs on power- of all kinds (money, influence, dominance, violence). In the Kingdom of the World there are clear winners and losers. Those with power and those without. It is a sign of our sinfulness when we turn to power to coerce others to do what we want. This is the way the Kingdom of the World operates.

It is the way of the World to make use of others for our own gain- even making use of the misfortune of others. Here we have a young woman who is not only enslaved by a spirit within her, but also enslaved by her masters who use her misfortune of being possessed for their financial gain.

Masters who, when their money (power/influence) is taken from them when she is released from the spirit by Paul, respond by making use of that power to crush the one who cost them. They could have taken Paul to civil court. In essence, sued him for their lost income. Instead they intentionally stir up the city of Philippi against them by tapping into the inherent racism that exists within the citizens (they are Jews!) and their patriotism (they are teaching an ethos that is not ours! They threaten our way of life!). As we

talked about last week, this is the easiest way to motivate people, fear and hatred. It is the way of the World.

The results are predictable. Violent oppression by the enraged crowd. Stripping and flogging Paul and Silas with rods. Throwing them in jail. Into the dark, cold space... lying on the hard floor, with 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. A resumption of their beatings? Exile? Worse? Helpless in the face of the power of their accusers and their manipulation of the people.

This is how the World works. Those with money, with influence, who know how to manipulate people, more often than not...they win. Who can have hope to stand against this?

So, there Paul and Silas lay, beaten and locked up. If this was an action movie. They would silently brood, plan, and when the time came they would act! Spring from the jail after killing their jailor and then seek revenge on those who had falsely accused them. Think the *Taken* movies, or *Rambo*. This is Kingdom of the World thinking. Violence is power.

But these men are citizens of a different Kingdom. The Kingdom of Heaven. Their way is a different way. There, in the dark, bloodied and bruised, they do not keep silent. Instead, they pray and sing hymns to God. In the face of the powers of the world; money, influence, violence and oppression. Their choice is not violence and hatred. Rather, they choose God and each other.

What did they sing, I wonder? We don't know for sure, but their songbook would have been the Psalms. Perhaps they sang Psalm 16, which Paul quoted in Antioch earlier in their ministry. It reads in part *“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 in the face of the powers of the world, we see the faith of Paul and Silas. A faith that says that the powers of this world are nothing alongside the power of God in Jesus Christ. That even bleeding, shackled, imprisoned with who knows what waiting for them, they will pray to God and sing hymns in praise of God. They sing to bear witness to others about the God who sustains them. They sing to remind themselves who their God is. God is the one in whom they take refuge. Who will not give them up to Sheol (the place of the dead) or to the Pit (the abyss). They sing and pray both to witness to their faith and to keep their faith.

What would you do in that same circumstance? Could you find it in yourself to pray and sing?

It was January of 2010 and Wartburg Seminarian Ben Larsen, his wife Renee and cousin Jonathan were working at St. Joseph's Home for Boys in Haiti when the earthquake struck. After the orphanage collapsed, Ben lay

buried beneath large chunks of concrete. His wife heard his voice; he was singing. Frantic to find him, she urged, "Keep singing," but the song stopped after he sang the words, "God's peace to us we pray." "If he was alive, he would have been calling for help desperately," Renee said. "Ben spent his last breath singing."

Buried, alone but for the distant voices of his wife and friend. Ben sang of God's love for him and for the world. Sang as witness and I would suspect to keep his faith. Sang of hope in the midst of all that seemed hopeless. This is the power of the kingdom of Heaven. Because those who are its citizens know that there is another way. One that will overcome, has overcome, the powers of this World.

The power of this kingdom is reflected both in Ben's song and that of Paul and Silas. A song of praise to the God they worship. Of trust in God and God's ultimate power. A faith that remains even in those lying bruised and bloodied in the dark, one that believes that even in a seemingly hopeless situation, all is not lost for God is with us.

And their witness does not go unnoticed. For there are others in the gloom with Paul and Silas. Locked away, waiting with their own uncertain futures. Perhaps having been beaten, waiting trial. Those both guilty and innocent. Witnesses who overhear these prayers, who hear the confidence in the songs that they sing.

And it is like a light in the darkness. A point of light for people who saw only the Pit lying before them. And so they listen, eagerly, on the edge of their seat. Like a starving person watching a meal come to them.

What was it like? To hear from another this witness even in the midst of all that sought to destroy them. According to the Kingdom of the World, they had lost. But, Paul and Silas' witness points to another reality. Another possibility.

Then, the earthquake, one severe enough to shake loose doors and rattle free shackles. Freedom lies before them. These ones imprisoned so unjustly.

The jailor, one who is both wielder of the power of the Kingdom of the World and who lies under its threat, comes out. Seeing the doors open. Certain that those within are gone. Knowing what the Kingdom of the World will do to him. Having no other hope in the face of that certainty, pulls out his sword and puts it to his breast. Knowing death will be his only escape.

But then, out of the darkness, comes a voice that saves his life. The voice of the very ones who he had power over. Perhaps abused himself.

“Do not harm yourself, we are all here.”

Those who he had every expectation to take advantage of their freedom. Did not. And in refraining from exercising their freedom, they save his life.

This moment of grace, of unexpected mercy, of certain death vanquished, moves him. Literally, to a place where he can see some other reality. Where he gets a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Of another way of living.

Calling for light, he runs into the jail, falls trembling before them, disoriented by what he has seen. By the gift they have given him. Then he brings them out of their darkness. This confused, conflicted soul. Seeing possibilities, he had never seen before. **Ones different from the Kingdom of the World. That these who he was told to fear and hate, are people. Capable of goodness and mercy and love. Who must see him in the same way, for by the rules of the World they should be gone, but instead... they stayed with their captor and spared his life.**

He asks, "What must I do to be saved?" What must I do to escape this Kingdom that demands I beat and imprison others, dominate them with power. Escape this Kingdom that will snatch my own life too. It is a cry of desperation and hope.

The response is not even an action at all. Believe. Believe in the Lord Jesus. Let us tell you about him and all that he has done. Let us tell you about the hope that is in us. The one that led us to sing in the darkness. The one that led us to save the life of the very one who imprisoned us. Who saw worth and value...in you.

And as the jailor washed their wounds, healed their bodies...they healed his soul. And then with a washing...perhaps from that very basin which held the water he had used, he was baptized.

As we stand on the cusp of Pentecost Sunday, let this story remind us that what we have been given, faith...the Holy Spirit, Word and Sacrament these are powerful things. Dangerous in a way that the Kingdom of the World cannot even imagine.

The Kingdom of Heaven is dangerous, because in it we find grace undeserved, we find a deep soul connection with all human beings...even those who hurt us. The Kingdom of Heaven is dangerous, because, through the waters of baptism, we receive the love of God in Jesus Christ. A love that shows us how we are all bound together. Those freed by Christ to enter into and see this glorious kingdom and those still bound to the Kingdom of this World. A love that can inspire and move us, we of little faith ...in those moments when we feel locked in a dark dungeon, when we are bruised by the world... inspire and move us to pray and sing. To sing of our trust in God. Who in Jesus Christ has entered even the darkest Pit of death and come back out. To sing of the power of love over hate. To sing of the amazing grace that we have experienced ourselves.

Inspired by the witness of Paul and Silas, renewed by our own singing and prayers, fed...with the very Body and Blood of Jesus. Let us dare to go this week into the Kingdom of this World and pray and sing...in all circumstances. And see what wonders God will do.