

Bound and Liberated

A Sermon by Rev. Katherine Schofield

Of the many people we hear about who end up in prison in the Bible, the apostle Paul probably spends the most time there. Paul's letters to the Philippians, Philemon, and the Colossians were all written while he was in prison. It's not surprising that he ends up in jail so frequently. He's a Jewish man, preaching about this person Jesus Christ, and wherever he goes, he's sharing a message that challenges and disorients those who hear it. The table turning, world-up-ending Good News of the gospel.

This scripture passage is framed by two distinct characters, the slave girl and the jailer. At first it may seem that these two are not thematically connected: mere points on the plot line leading to Paul and Silas's imprisonment and release. The slave and the jailer, we might assume, hold opposite roles in society. She is controlled entirely by others. He is in control of others. She has been deprived of her liberty. He deprives others of their liberty.

Other details in the story seem to confirm this contrast. We realize the slave girl is not only the property of men who exploit her fortunetelling talent for their gain, but she's also apparently controlled by a demonic spirit that is the source of her talent. The girl has no agency; no personal, economic, or spiritual liberty. She is owned, body and soul. When she sees Paul and the others, she starts to follow them and yell out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Like others we see in scripture who are possessed by spirits, she may be obnoxious and disconcerting, but she speaks the truth! Paul, in fact, refers to himself as a slave of Christ. But the slave-girl carries on and on -- *for many days*. And finally, Paul can't take it anymore and, as the scripture tells us, prompted apparently by his annoyance, Paul orders the spirit to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. And it does.

We might expect the people who witness this exorcism to react with awe, wonder, and even faith. Instead, there is greed, bigotry, and anger. After the demon leaves the girl, she can no longer tell fortunes so she is of no worth to her owners. And her owners complain to the magistrates that Paul and Silas have destroyed their business, deprived them of their means of income. In fact, they accuse Paul and Silas of "advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Is it simply that by getting in way of the all-mighty dollar Paul and Silas are breaking the law. Or that by providing just a bit of liberation (and not even complete liberation) they have taken direct action against the mechanism of the Empire. In sharing the table flipping Good News that people (even enslaved, female, ill people) are more important than profits and property – they're challenging the status quo and it's enough to land them in prison.

Paul and Silas are different, and therefore considered dangerous and a legitimate target of violence. It is not difficult to find similarly targeted groups among us: immigrant workers accused of taking "our" jobs, members of minority religious traditions who are seen as suspicious if not sinister, those whose sexual orientation or gender identity doesn't fit the norm, people who are living with HIV and AIDS.

At this point, we might wish to hear more about what happens to this girl, who remained a slave to her human owners. The focus of this scene is the power of Jesus over all the spirits of the world, but we might well ask whether and how there could be a more complete freedom for this woman. The story simply leaves her behind, nameless, disturbing, and perhaps a reminder of the continuing need of liberation for so many.

It seems as though bigotry has won the day, with Paul and Silas locked in chains. The first sign that the powers of this world are really not in charge comes with the surprising songs in that dark cell. Paul and Silas sing praises to God -- not laments for the suffering (which would be understandable, appropriate, and biblical) -- but praise for the privilege of being God's servants in the face of injustice. God has already sprung preachers from Roman prisons twice in Acts (5:17-21, 12:6-11), so we readers shouldn't be surprised that the Philippian jail can't hold Paul and Silas. But the earthquake in this text is certainly a strange one, as it is one that sets free instead of trapping and crushing. This earthquake is the visible manifestation of God shaking this world's powers to their foundations.

Given the story of Peter's rescue from prison in chapter 12, we might expect Paul and Silas to go immediately to Lydia's house. But this is an escape story without an escape. Paul and Silas don't leave. Being God's servants does not mean escape from the dangerous places, but means the opportunity to be the voice and the hands of Christ there. And so just as Paul and Silas shared the gospel in song with their fellow prisoners (is that why all the other prisoners, whose chains and doors were also undone, stayed put with Paul and Silas?), now they save their jailer both from the suicide that Roman honor expected with a failure of duty, and from a life without faith in Christ.

Yes, the jailer is also bound as a slave. The entire story will eventually suggest we all are servants of someone or something. Oh, at first the jailer seems more like the slave owner than the slave. A jailer controls and contains others, right? He literally holds the key that deprives people of their liberty. And yet. . . Notice the jailer in our story is himself in prison. Notice also that he's first introduced when the narrator explains that the magistrates of the town, to appease the merchants who owned the slave girl, "order" the jailer to "keep [Paul and Silas] securely in jail." The jailer must follow the order of the civic leaders—who themselves were pressured by the economic leaders. The jailer's own enslavement is clear when he nearly commits suicide after the earthquake. He knows he'll be held responsible for any escaped prisoners, and suicide will be kinder than whatever the powers-that-be will do to him. When Paul assures him they have not

escaped, the jailer falls down “trembling” before Paul and Silas, and asks the crucial question: “What must I do to be saved?”

Our God is a God of liberation for all people. A God that parts the sea and breaks the chains. A God that transcends the torturous cross and busts out of the tomb. This belief is at the center of our faith, and particularly what’s known as “liberation theology”.

“Liberation theology” can be summed up in 5 words, spoken by a woman of color, the descendent of slaves, who herself was severely beaten and imprisoned in Charleston, SC in 1963. That experience of her own imprisonment made Fannie Lou Hamer “hard”, and an outspoken advocate for Civil Rights. In an address to the National Women's Political Caucus in Washington in 1971 she made sure those five words heard loud and clear, "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free."

This Sunday members of Old South Church will participate in the Boston AIDS Walk for the 32 year in a row. We are proud that it was members of Old South Church who helped start the walk and keep it going. In an interview done for the 30th Anniversary of the Boston AIDS Walk our own Jim MacDonald had this to say, “In those days, there was so much education needed. People were scared to death, but they really had no idea what AIDS was. The biggest hurdle was making people understand that it wasn’t just a disease for gay people.” In its early days, AIDS Walk Boston was known as From All Walks of Life, a name that struck Jim as particularly appropriate and poignant. “I remember so vividly starting the Walk from the Common, walking all the way down Commonwealth Avenue to Beacon Street, to Coolidge Corner, and back down to the Common again,” he said. “As we would turn to walk down the BU Bridge, we could see stretched across it a big banner that read ‘From All Walks of Life.’ It really hit us that, yes, we were from all walks of life – and [AIDS] hit every one of us.” Although, thankfully, most people in this part of the world who contract HIV are able to treat it and continue to live lives of meaning and purpose – this is not the case for all people, especially the poor and marginalized in this country and those around the world who do not have access to the medical care that could save their lives. Our liberation is bound up in the liberation of all those who are HIV positive – and so we march.

Jesus, and Paul, and Fannie Lou Hamer, and an anonymous slave girl have taught us well- "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free." And so we will stand, and march, and fight,– until every girl, in every corner of the world, has power over her own body. Until every asylum seeking child is released from captivity and united with his parents. Until each privatized prison recognizes the dignity and worth of each prisoner. Until we ourselves have released the shame, the guilt, the worry - whatever it is that shackles our hearts – for to work for the liberation of others we also must be set free. "Nobody's Free Until Everybody's Free."