

NEW FREEDOM

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Sunday, May 26, 2019

Scripture: [Acts 16:16–34](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today, we'll read from the Acts of the Apostles as Paul and Silas are beginning their travels that will take them deeper and deeper into the Roman empire sharing their faith and experience of Jesus with wider and wider audiences. As it has always been when followers of Jesus go on the move, that travel will mean that they will encounter the full diversity of belief: deep faith, and no faith, the Roman civic religion and worship of the emperor, down to folk religion of local spirits.

As they travel, they meet a woman who has been taken from her family... or maybe abandoned by her family. She has been enslaved... but she also has a special gift... a spirit that has plagued *her*, but allowed her to tell fortunes, essentially... which enriched those who have trapped her in bondage. That is, until one day on the side of a road.

SERMON

In the complexities of life... it can be hard to tell what binds you, and what sets you free.

Freedom, after all, has too often become “just another word” for us all. It goes with beer commercials and fireworks... it gets used as a verbal cudgel by political opponents on one another.

We can lose track of what freedom means for ourselves... for others...

I wonder what this woman with a spirit thought it meant. Had she always ever known this? Had she always been measured by the amount of money she could bring in for her enslavers... no matter the cost to her body, or her mind? What did she dream it would look like... freedom?

Paul and Silas are bad evangelists here... they never even ask her what she wants... What would make her whole. They seem utterly disinterested in her.

We never even know her name.

The Bible can often be challenging in this way. There are many women who are never named. Even here in Acts, where we can meet the hospitable and successful business woman, Lydia... where we can hear of the miracle that came to the disciple Tabitha... this girl, trapped in slavery, has no name. Paul and Silas don't seem to be in a rush to get to know her. Largely, what we learn about Paul and Silas is that they can get annoyed and cast out spirit in the name of Jesus... maybe even a little out of spite.

The Divining woman proclaims Paul and Silas to be what they are, I guess. (Demons and spirits have a habit in the New Testament of seeing the truth of Jesus and his disciples when others cannot, and those who face the world's injustice often have a way of seeing the truth beneath the glare of shining life.) She calls them, "Slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Our scriptures know how to do irony, slaves of Christ make others free... and so they do... aggravated by the constant (maybe loud, but true) commentary from the girl.

So, Paul and Silas, almost out of aggravation, almost by accident, discover that being a disciple has profound implications for how we deal with the social and economic liberation of others... Jesus shows up... and the spirit is gone... and... is she free?

What does she think freedom means?

We never know, I suppose the best we can hope for is that her captors, having lost their profit center in her divining gifts, have lost their motivation to keep her... but we don't know that for sure... what we do know is that her story continues to break open Paul and Silas to tell the story of Jesus in love to wider and wider crowds... even when they find themselves singing hymns in a Roman prison for daring to interrupt the commerce of injustice.

┆ *"The practice of love is the most powerful antidote to the politics of domination." - bell hooks*

If you follow Jesus along that path, it can lead you to a prison. But you might, in the end, walk out free and singing more than you were when you went in. Because the world needs you to be transformed into singers of love. I hope that Paul and Silas leave that prison better equipped to know and love others... I hope they leave more free.

Because there are so many who do not have names... Because domination has many forms... it is wherever what one can produce is valued over one's own humanity. There are abusive labor practices, abusive relationships, there are still, to this day, people who engage in human trafficking and slavery here in this country and around the world. Myriad ways in which we may be trapped in systems that honor our production more than our humanity.

We are in a season of our national political life in which we are again seeing state and governments seeking to control and bind the bodies and lives of women. Recent legislation in places as far flung as Alabama and Ohio have begun to challenge long held rights of women to control their bodies, their choices, their own life's path.

In the midst of all of this, I am thankful that throughout our history and especially since 1971, the United Church of Christ has spoken often and clearly: when we consider the multiplicity of ways in which we honor and celebrate the gift of life, we must honor the freedom and agency of women to make choices about their lives, their reproductive health, their very bodies. We have, as a body, felt called to speak out when we see others trying to remove that freedom and agency, through legislation, illegal trafficking, dehumanization in language or in behavior, or any other way. For God speaks freedom into our lives.

This Gospel of Jesus that Paul and Silas were carrying was for the freedom of all who encountered it, even if they did not know it. In this story, it "enslaves" two disciples to its love and power, it frees the diviner from her spirit, it breaks the economic chains of her captors, it destroys a prison, and in so doing it frees a prison guard from a life of servitude to an empire that thrived on fear rather than love.

See, when you show up with Jesus, even in “just” your song, whatever that might mean... because it’s never “just” a song... you can bear witness to the shattering of prisons, and you find free prisoners *and* free prison guards. Free from structures and economies of oppression, free from lives ruled by fear, free from power over...

This weekend, the nation celebrates Memorial Day, honoring the military service and sacrifice of those who died in service to our country... often attributed to practices of the United States and Confederacy during and after the Civil War. In its own way then, Memorial Day has complex connection to the freedom of many, if not all, from the horror and diminishment of spirit enacted in our country’s practice of chattel slavery. It’s connection with real freedom is not hard to find.

I have often struggled with the complicated balance of how we talk about freedom—fought for, and given up—in relation to military service. It’s an interesting thing to note the many people who have died for our country through very little choice of their own... either through our practice of the draft, various financial ways it could be avoided by the wealthy, all the way through the economic inequality that has made elective military service one of very few ways out of poverty today.

I also think of my generation of veterans, who have much more complicated relationships with the wars they were called to serve in, and hence with the loss of friends and compatriots they experienced in those wars.

Like disciples, my prayer and my hope for the souls of those we remember this weekend is that we honor them enough to make sure that they gave their lives not for a country’s glory, not for some abstract sense of freedom, but that they knew what Julia Ward Howe wrote to an old soldier’s campfire song... that they knew *Christ’s* glory which could “transfigure you and me... as he died to make us holy, let us die to make all free...” Not surprisingly, a lot of people prefer to *live* to make all free... And so it was the *living* that Abraham Lincoln called to be dedicated to the cause of liberty by the sacrifice of so many on the fields of Gettysburg. That we might “take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion.”

We must be dedicated. We must sing out. We must be part of Christ’s call which can shatter prisons and free us, from ways in which we have been bound... or have bound others. From slavery, from dehumanization, from violence and war itself. We must *lift every voice and sing* until freedom means something for all.

May it be so. Amen.