

“A Spirit of Freedom”

Acts 16:16-34

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The Bible story for today from the Acts of the Apostles is a little like one of those TV dramas where every character gets dragged through the mill of conflict and entanglement, but by the end of the hour everyone experiences some kind of liberation. You might say Acts 16 is a study in freedom.

The drama begins with a woman who has a spirit for discerning the future. She is a palm reader, a fortune teller. Perhaps she is an astrologer. At that time and in that culture, it was understood that a spirit of divination dwelled within her. People were willing to pay money to be told what their future held in store. But this unnamed woman is not free. She is a slave to her owner. An unscrupulous business man has seen her in-dwelling spirit of divination as an opportunity to turn a quick profit. It would be polite to refer to this man as her agent. But it is more accurate to say he is a leech, a pimp. He is earning a living at her expense. His greed has become her imprisonment.

When Paul and Silas come onto the scene preaching a powerful word of good news, the spirit within her sees right away that compared to the power of the word the apostles are preaching, the spirit's power is a false hope.

This woman recognizes authenticity when she hears it. She does more than follow the apostles; she becomes a self-appointed cheerleader. The spirit within her cries out through her megaphone, “These men are servants of the Most High, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!” At first, Paul and Silas appreciate her enthusiasm for their ministry.

But soon, they grow tired of the spirit's relentless calling out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" It was as if Paul and Silas didn't want their ministry to be too closely associated with this reader of palms, this teller of fortunes. They didn't want the community confusing what they had to offer; namely, the power of the risen Christ, with what she had to offer; an empty hope. So, Paul and Silas confront this spirit that dwells within her, this spirit of divination, and they drive it out of her. This they do, not out of any kind of compassion for her well-being, but solely out of a need to distance themselves from the woman's profession.

However, the unintended consequence of this exorcism is that the woman is no longer of value to her unscrupulous master. Without the spirit that allowed her to see into the future, she is of no further economic value to the slave owner. No one knows what becomes of this woman. Does she become a believer? Does she become destitute, now lacking any means of support? Or does she rejoice in being set free from a shady business man and make her way in the world as an independent woman, free at last? The storyteller is not interested in her fate, but I am interested in her fate. I am interested because in the world today there are millions of women whose lives are bought and sold by unscrupulous operators determined to make a quick dollar regardless of the human misery they create. Though Paul and Silas had no visible compassion for that woman, the church today must demonstrate compassion for any woman whose freedom is compromised, whose body is exploited, whose life is traded as if it were a commodity in the marketplace. The church can have a hand in this kind of freedom.

Now the story continues with an unexpected twist. The "business" man who is now bereft of his income lodges an official complaint against Paul and Silas. He drags them to the open air court in the local market. He accuses them of disturbing the city and of forcing upon them customs that are not lawful or proper.

He raises quite a ruckus! The magistrates have Paul and Silas arrested, stripped of their clothes, beaten with rods, and tossed into prison; in fact, into the inner most cell where their feet are fastened into stocks.

Now it is Paul and Silas who are not free. Their freedom is yanked away from them. It's like that new axiom that states, "No good deed will go unpunished." Imprisoned for their faith, these two witnesses are undaunted. They commence to sing and to pray. They sing with such passion that the other inmates are all paying attention. It's as if they have transformed a jail cell into a chapel, a prison into a sanctuary. I imagine them singing out loud,

Glory, glory hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down.
Glory, glory hallelujah, since I laid my burdens down.

I imagine them singing right through their repertoire of freedom songs.

Some glad morning when this life is o'er, I'll fly away;
To a home on God's celestial shore, I'll fly away.
I'll fly away, O glory, I'll fly away;
When I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.

Right on through the songs they know by heart, freedom songs:

We shall overcome, we shall overcome,
We shall overcome some day;
Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe,
We shall overcome some day.

By the time the earthquake causes the foundations of the prison to shake and the cell doors to pop open, the whole jailbird population has become a church choir. They're singing in four part harmony.

Instead of Elvis' jailhouse rock, it is Paul and Silas' jailhouse gospel!

I do not doubt that an earthquake caused the cell door to pop open, but I have always understood this symbolically, as a sign that though the body can be imprisoned, the soul can not.

I have always seen this moment as a powerful testimony to the freedom that comes with the decision to believe. Thus, it is not the earthquake that sets them free, it is their confidence in God's liberating love that sets them free.

Though I am intrigued by the technology of the seismograph, it is the power of love that blows me away. On the occasions when I'm asked, "How do we know if this is love," my reply tends to be this: love sets people free to be the men and women God has created us to be. If the relationship you are in is not allowing you to be that person, then it may be something other than love that you are experiencing; keep looking!

Nowadays we have this term 'church shopping.' People say they are looking for a good 'fit.' What I hope that means is that they are looking for a church community where the power of love is what sets people free rather than power by any other name. A lot of studies have been done of churches that are growing by leaps and bounds. I know I should pay attention to those studies, but my pastoral instinct tells me there is really only one way to grow a church, and that is by inviting one person at a time to trust in the power of God's love to set you free for living an abundant life.

Now the storyteller takes us to the unsuspecting jailer. By midnight, he has fallen into a deep sleep. Though nervous about his responsibility for keeping the prisoners in their cells, he has managed to fall into dreamland. I picture him in a reclining chair with his feet up on the desk, snoring lightly.

Awakened by the earthquake and the shaking of the foundation, he returns to full consciousness. He jumps out of his chair and notices right away that the cell doors have popped open and the chains are broken. Instantly, he concludes that all of the inmates have taken advantage of this golden opportunity and have fled for the hill country.

Knowing that this escape will look very bad on his resume, the jailer decides to take his own life rather than face the scorn of his superiors. He is not free. His freedom has been stolen by fear of the consequences of sleeping on the job. He lives in fear of those who have authority over him. He sees no alternative for himself. He is trapped by what he considers to be an unforgivable lapse in responsibility. He draws his sword from its sheath.

Paul cries out from the darkness, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer calls for lanterns to be lit, runs into the inner cell block, grasps the extraordinary truth that the prisoners have elected to remain in their cells, and falls trembling at the apostles’ feet. It’s as if he is overwhelmed by an unexpected, undeserved grace. Not in his wildest imagination can he conceive of anyone caring this much for his life; certainly not from the very ones whose incarceration is at his discretion.

Who are these guys? And what God do they worship? Who are these compassionate foreigners and what motivates them to care for me by not fleeing the coop when given the chance? Who are these guys and what must I do to be like them? And Paul offers the quiet invitation to live under the authority of Jesus Christ. For this is where freedom begins. And the jailer ushers Paul and Silas to his private living quarters where he bathes their wounds, offers them food, and asks them to baptize his whole family. Now the jailer is free. He has moved from living under an authority that oppresses to living under an authority that sets one free to care as no one has ever cared before.

In the morning, the magistrates send word that the apostles may be released and sent on their way. But the apostles know something about being truly free. Since they were publicly accused and publicly humiliated, they insist on being publicly exonerated and publicly released. In other words, they insist on being treated with justice.

Paul and Silas went from town to town preaching about the freedom that is ours in Christ Jesus. With the slave girl, it is a freedom from being owned by anybody. With the apostles, it is a freedom that comes with loving and being loved. With the jailer, it is the freedom that comes with submitting to a higher authority, the authority of grace. Sisters and brothers, God is giving us a spirit of freedom. Let us claim this gift!

In the greatest of hope, Amen!