

“Everyone’s Chains Were Unfastened”

Acts of the Apostles
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Connecticut

South

Reading through the story for today from the Acts of the Apostles, I was struck by the drama of the earthquake causing the foundation of the prison to shake and the chains binding the prisoners to become unfettered. I did this reading on Wednesday on a Delta flight to Rapid City. I was on my way to visit one of our South Church mission partners, the Sioux YMCA. The story of Paul and Silas in prison and the story of the Sioux YMCA are similar. Both begin in conflict and end up in family celebrations.

Paul and Silas had been arrested and tossed into jail because they had upset a local business man. They had exorcised a spirit of divination from a female slave, thus removing the economic advantage gained by her owners. Her freedom was their demise. Imprisoned for this local offense, Paul and Silas started singing hymns in the middle of the night. When the earthquake loosened their chains, the jailer came running in to see if they had escaped. Instead of escaping, they invited the jailer to turn his life around, introducing him to the Lord Jesus Christ. By sun up, he and his whole family had been baptized. It was quite a family celebration!

In the 1860’s, near Mankado, Minnesota, the US Cavalry massacred a village of Lakota Indians. All of the adults were killed in the battle or executed afterwards. The youth and children were rounded up and placed in a prison where they remained for ten years.

The only visitors allowed inside were volunteers from the local Young Men’s Christian Association, the YMCA. Inside the prison, the volunteers taught the stories of the Great Liberator, Jesus Christ, and they sang hymns together, hymns of hope and faith. When the day of release arrived, the Lakota prisoners were given a piece of land in western Dakota Territory between the

Cheyenne and Morrow Rivers. Those YMCA volunteers went along for the journey and stayed there and established what we now know as the Sioux YMCA. It remains a place where families celebrate the goodness of life.

Paul and Silas would be trustees of the Sioux Y if they were alive today. So, I find this a very meaningful way to volunteer my time.

As I left Rapid City in my rental car, I was on the lookout for images of family life. I knew I'd be preaching on Mother's Day when the church celebrates The Festival of the Christian Home, so I was watching for signs of family I could weave into a sermon.

Within minutes, I had arrived at the Black Hills National Cemetery. I had buried a number of veterans in that cemetery in the 1970's, men and women who had served their country bravely and honorably. I was awed by the sea of white crosses. It struck me that I was looking at a special kind of family, soldiers and sailors and airmen and Marines from every race and ethnicity, old and young, male and female, officers and enlistees. There was no distinction between Protestant and Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist, just a sea of crosses suggesting one gigantic family united by a Christian identity. I slowed down and pulled off the interstate. "Family, I thought, is a special community of people who covenant together for freedom's sake."

One of my goals was to stop at Bear Butte and attempt to reach its summit at 4400 feet. As it turned out, I was the only hiker in the park that morning. As the trail twisted up the face of this igneous mass of rock and scrub pine, I started seeing the evidence of Lakota prayer visitors. For centuries, Bear Butte has been the location where Plains Indians come for a vision, for prayer, to be in the presence of Wan Kan Tanka, the Great Spirit. As prayers are spoken, colorful fabric is knotted to branches as a way for the prayer to be continued long after the people have left.

On many trees, I saw multiple colors of cloth. I paused at one and imaged a whole family standing there: the dad knotting a blue fabric, the mom a yellow, the son a red, and the daughter a white piece. I pictured them there on Bear Butte praying together, a

whole family taking time out to be in the presence of God. I thought then about our church school and our Sunday Afternoon Youth ministry and our blessing of the animals and other times when families choose to be together for a time of spiritual reflection. I nearly ripped a strip of blue cotton from my hiking shirt to knot it onto a pine branch. Instead, I just said a prayer thanking God for mothers everywhere. Continuing the ascent, I thought, “Family is the people with whom we pray.”

I came around a sharp bend and up a steep slope. I had had my eyes fixed on the ground in search of rattlesnakes, so I was startled to look up and see two mule deer staring at me, as if wondering who this intruder might be. I guessed they were brother and sister, yearling twins maybe, scruffy looking. Not afraid of me at all, they wondered off to continue with their play. I watched them until they disappeared behind some rocks.

I thought about siblings in other families, how we depend on each other, compete with each other, love each other, go to bat for each other, and sometimes play fairly together as these two mule deer seemed to be doing. As I tightened up the laces in my boots, I thought, “Families are siblings who stand together unafraid of what’s coming because they have learned to rely on each other.”

I did reach the summit that Thursday morning. But it was my discovery at the bottom, an hour later, that halted me. There near the abandoned visitor center was a bust of a revered Lakota holy man, Frank Fools Crow. He was the nephew of Black Elk. Beneath the bust were inscribed the words of a prayer Fools Crow had uttered at the close of a speech he gave at the US Congress in Washington D.C. The prayer felt like a fitting close to a sermon about families. He prayed:

“Give us a blessing so that our works and actions be one in unity, and that we will be able to listen to each other. In doing so, we shall with good heart walk hand in hand to face the future.”

From Paul and Silas blessing the prison guard’s family with the sacrament of baptism, to Frank Fools Crow blessing the human family with the sacrament of prayer, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who treasure the family and who find in family life

the very presence of the Living God.

Leaving Bear Butte State Park, I knew I was on the road again 'in the greatest of hope.' Amen.