

sermon-5/16/10 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Freedom”
Acts 16:16-34

This fun text in Acts has parts that are hard to believe (the fortuitous earthquake that did not hurt anyone), humor (Paul’s exasperated healing of the slave girl), and a powerful message all rolled into one.

This text is basically about freedom. Who are imprisoned, the ones in stocks or those outside the jail cell? Who is the slave in this story? And what does it mean to be saved? Finally, how do all those questions relate to freedom?

Let’s take up the slavery issue first. Paul and Silas meet up with a slave girl. She is enslaved to her masters who are using her to make money. Herb O’Driscoll says we would call these ancient business men pimps in our day. They were using a poor, defenseless woman or girl for their own profit.

We know who these men are. We have seen examples of them in our day. These are the kind of business people who only care about the bottom line. They don’t worry about using others, or who gets hurt, just as long as they make a profit. Whether we are talking about coal mine owners who ignore safety violations, or gas companies like BP who do the same, or greedy financial institutions who gamble with other people’s money bankrupting their institutions and giving obscene bonuses, we know modern day versions of these masters who attack Paul and Silas.

We see their true colors in this story when their bottom line is threatened. They don’t care that this slave girl has been healed by Paul. They just see their source of income disappearing, so they do what they can do to retaliate. Those who earn their money through selfish means seldom act civil when they are threatened. These masters lie about Paul and Silas. Their anti-Semitism is also exposed. Greed and prejudice often go hand in hand.

The slave girl is not the only slave in this story. Interestingly the slave girl calls Paul and Silas slaves of the Most High God. She has that right. While many of us would prefer to use the term “servant of God” rather than slave, it is essentially the same thing.

When it comes right down to it, we are all servants or slaves to some reality or person. Some of us are slaves to our jobs. Our work controls our decisions. It gets our best energies. Our families or friendships may suffer as a result, but we don’t want to be unsuccessful at work. We don’t want to look incompetent. We want others to marvel at what a good worker we are. Our identities are on the line when we are slaves to our jobs.

Some are slaves to their routine. They are stuck in a rut that has become comfortable. Any change of that routine feels uncomfortable or threatening. While routine can be comforting to some, others find it stifling, but don’t know how to break out of it. Routine can be a tough slave master.

Some are slaves to their self-interest making sure to take care of themselves first even if it means ignoring the needs of those who are far worse off. Others call money their master. The point is, we are all slaves to something or someone. What is crucial then is to determine to whom will we be a slave or servant? How will that choice effect how we live and treat others? Acts says being a slave to God will ironically give us freedom from all those other masters that can enslave us.

A related issue is the one about who is in jail? It is obvious Paul and Silas are literally in jail. Their situation was grim indeed. They had been severely flogged and then put in stocks. This sounds bad, but it is worse than it sounds. The stocks put their legs in a very uncomfortable position. It was a kind of torture. And they are in the innermost cell of the jail where it is pitch black, sitting in stocks among the spiders unable to move. They might as well have been put into a tomb.

But look how Paul and Silas deal with that. Their bodies may have been imprisoned, but their spirits are incredibly free. They sing and pray not letting their situation define their outlook or hope.

I am reminded of a Presbyterian missionary, Ben Weir, who was held captive by Shiite extremist for 16 months in Iran in that famous hostage situation some years ago. After Ben was freed, he told about how he sang on the first night of his capture, "All praise to thee, my God, this night." It was the great hymns of the Church that kept his spirit free.

Ironically, in the Acts story, it was the jailer who was the one truly in jail. His spirit was imprisoned by his job. When it looked like he had failed because he assumed those in his jail had escaped, he immediately decided to kill himself. Talk about being a slave to one's job!

This jailer was as good as dead, and then Paul speaks. Acts wants us to see the great reversal going on here. It was the ones in jail who set the jailer free! He was as good as dead, and then he is free to experience new life. This is really a little resurrection story.

What is critical to note here is that the freedom we have in Christ is not just for us to enjoy. It is not just for our own salvation, our own spiritual needs. Paul and Silas are freed by the earthquake, which symbolizes God's presence. But they stay in jail so they might help the jailer, the one who tortured them. Freedom in Christ is never an individual gift. It is for the whole community, even our enemies!

Finally the issue of salvation comes up in this text. The jailer asks, "What must I do to be saved?" Scholars tell us he is not talking about the after life here. He wants to know how he can go on and not kill himself, how he can be saved from punishment after the earthquake. Paul and Silas use his question to take it to a deeper level. They get into a more profound understanding of salvation.

Commentators tell us that salvation in Acts is not primarily about who gets into heaven or who goes to hell. It has much more to do with what we experience, however partially, while we live on this earth. When Paul says the jailer must believe in Jesus, these commentators say that to believe means to give our personal trust and commitment to the God we experience in Jesus. To have faith, they say, is to be obedient to God in personal trust.

It is that kind of belief or faith that makes our lives meaningful as we navigate our way through our brief time on earth. It does not make them easy, to be sure. Just look at what Paul experienced in his life. But it will make our lives free. Acts says we can see that the jailer had a genuine conversion experience here by seeing how he treated Paul and Silas. He showed compassion to them with his acts of kindness, washing their wounds and feeding them.

Actually, there were two washings in this story. Paul and Silas had their wounds washed. That must have felt great. The jailer had his spirit washed when they baptized him. That was a far more significant bath, one that would change the jailer's life and the life of his family baptized with him.

This story, or parable as one of the lectionary class members called it, shows us how God's presence will shake things up. The earthquake, while difficult to understand literally, is really a great way to picture God's presence in this story. When God enters the picture, things get shaken, reversals happen. Things aren't as they would appear on the surface. Freedom becomes a deep reality.

But remember, to be free in Christ comes as a result of choosing very carefully to whom we will be a slave. To be a slave to any other reality but God will not lead to freedom. But when we choose to be God's slave, we will know true freedom. We will also see that this freedom is not to hoard, but to be shared compassionately with others.

To whom will you be a slave? Amen