

When Catherine Crow and I were visiting earlier this week, she asked, “Is this another year when the Mother’s Day Scripture is Paul in prison?” Indeed it is, and while there is a woman in the story, this is not even close to a Mother’s Day text; of course many preachers have an ability to twist anything involving God’s goodness and love and apply it to motherhood. We are not going there this morning.

In the Book of Acts, Luke recounts Paul’s mission like an embedded reporter. Last week, Paul encountered Lydia in Philippi. She came to faith and hosted Paul and Silas in her home. In the verses following this morning’s reading, they will return to Lydia’s house when they are released from prison.

As we tune in to today’s lesson, Luke is again reporting from cosmopolitan Philippi, and much in contrast to Lydia, who was a businesswoman with her own household, Paul and Silas encounter an unnamed woman, a slave, owned by people who are making a good living off her ability to tell fortunes. She is said to have a spirit of divination. In the Greek, it is *pneuma pythona* – spirit and snake. The snake well may be connected in people’s minds back then as the symbol of the Greek god Apollos at Delphi, home of the prophetess, the oracle of Delphi.

This morning, Tammy and I will read the text as dialogue, with Tammy first speaking the part of the slave girl with the spirit, and then telling of what happened when Paul and Silas were brought before the Roman magistrate and jailed. I will offer Luke’s report of the responses of Paul and Silas. Let us hear God’s word to us in Acts 16:16-34:

¹⁶One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination.

I brought my owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ I began to follow Paul and his group, and I would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ⁸ I kept doing this for many days.

But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”

And it came out of me that very hour. ¹⁹ But when my owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When my owners had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.

²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Our brief Gospel lesson is a part of Jesus' farewell meal with and words for his disciples before his death. Chapter 17 stands apart because Jesus turns from his disciples and looks to heaven. The whole chapter is Jesus' prayer to God for his disciples. It is not clear if the disciples actually hear the prayer, but it is meant for them, and for all disciples after them. So, let us listen in on a portion of Jesus' prayer for us in John 17:20-23:

²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

The story could seem to be all about the money, the lost fortune of those who relied on the young woman's gift to tell fortunes, to predict futures, how a life will be or how it might even be better. We soon learn it was about a lot more than the money.

There was a town meeting. Members of the Greater Philippi Chamber of Commerce were there in full force. A single incident was the cause, but the hearing unearthed deeper concerns and fears. Yes, Paul and Silas had called upon the name of Jesus to cast a spirit out of a slave woman, ending a lucrative cash flow for her owners, but in the proceedings, there is no mention of lost fortune. There is plenty about the uninvited and unwelcome outsiders – non-Philippians, Jews and followers of Jesus, bringing their culture and their religion to "our land." They said, it is not part of our Roman custom. It was indeed about more than the money, more than the economy – it was about keeping Philippi pure in its national identity, race, religion and traditions.

In fact, we are given no outcome of the hearing, no resolution to the economic loss of the slave woman's owners, but we do know Paul and Silas and others in the early church will not shy away from encountering fortune and purity seekers again; in this way, they are no different than Jesus who continually risked his own ritual impurity to seek justice for those to whom access to equality was denied.

Yet, before we move to the prison scene, the earthquake, the midnight worship, I pause to ponder the young woman's fate. For while freed by Paul of the spirit that possessed her, she remains enslaved to her owners; but now, likely worse off, because without her fortune telling abilities, how will they use her? I would feel better if I knew the woman was at Lydia's when Paul and Silas were released from prison later in the chapter. Yet, as with many Gospel stories of healing and unbinding, we are left wondering, "What happened to that healed man? That cured woman?" "Where are they now?" But, the story usually moves on.

Our story also moves on, away from a focus on fortune, toward the interplay of faith and freedom. Who is free? Sometimes those who seem bound are free, and those who seem free are bound. In our lesson, "[the Spirit of Jesus] set a young woman free, but two of Jesus' people are jailed in the process." [Willimon, William, *Acts*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 139.] At the same time, that young woman was still enslaved. Paul and Silas are imprisoned, but felt free to worship with hymns and prayers. Their jailer seems to be free, and has the keys, but is so bound to fear of the Roman authorities, he has reckoned taking his own life is preferable to the expected accusation he allowed prisoners to escape. And with the earthquake, Paul and Silas are free, but voluntarily remain bound to help free the jailer from his fear. Who is free? Who is bound?

In the midst of the jailer's fear, comes Paul's voice from the dark depths of the prison, "Do not harm yourself, we are all here." One senses the words are more than stating the fact of Paul's and Silas' physical presence with the jailer, but an assurance, "...we are all here for you, and we too are dealing with questions of freedom and faith."

The jailer asks the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Yet, before we immediately consider this to be his Jesus moment, a time and date mark of faith for the man and his household, we might pause. Without neglecting the faith event, there is a freedom element also at work, with his underlying question having as much or more to do with his life now than his fate in the hereafter.

As I studied the text, and the jailer's question, "What must I do to be saved?", two different biblical commentators suggest the jailer was also asking, "What must I do to be free?," or the question to which I expect many can relate, "How will I survive this mess I am in?" [Ron Cole-Turner and Paul Walaskay, in *Feasting on the Word Year C*, volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 526 and pp. 527.]

Many of us have plans in place for emergencies, power outages, and road service when our car breaks down; still, we neither plan nor welcome messes in our lives, much less an earthquake size upset. We cherish times when we feel free, when our business is running smoothly, our families are secure and relatively happy. We may feel good about the way we treat our employees or respect our co-workers or fellow students, and the ways we can offer our time and talent to both church and community. But then...but then. We live in anxiety about the potential but then. But then the economy tanks, or there is a family crisis or critical illness, or something else disrupts our plan, the good flow of life, and we begin to sense being bound to anxiety and fear. We wonder what we must do to be freed from a worry, a burden, a disease, an unfulfilling job, or untenable situation. We ask, "What must I do to be free?" "How will I survive this mess I am in?" "What must I do to be saved?"

If someone says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," we might say we are already there, we already do, but may also sense we are being told we are not believing the right way, or with enough fervor. We might even be left thinking, "If I just had more faith..." as if faith is measured by capacity, or offers a strategic plan for self-salvation.

I like how Ron Cole-Turner, of Pittsburgh Seminary, views Paul's faith answer to the jailer as an invitation. He writes, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ is an invitation to the jailer, and indeed to everyone, to tune in to the level of God's action." [Ron Cole-Turner, in *Feasting on the Word Year C, volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 526.]

By the level of God's action, he is saying to look past the surface issues such as the lost fortunes of the slave girl's owners, and higher than the easy sound-bites or tweeted answers of much of today's social and political discourse. Yet, it is the phrase "tune in" to God's action that caught my attention. It made me think of one of the questions about which I am always curious in a congregation, but which I have never found asked on a church survey. As a pastor, I might ask, "From where do you receive your news?" I would like to know if most people tune in to Fox or CNN or PBS or network news, public radio or a favorite radio personality, or a daily print newspaper; or perhaps it is the Daley Show or even Saturday Night Live, or simply following a Twitter or an extremist blog. Where are we tuning in?

When Ron Cole-Turner writes of tuning in to God's action, it is with the idea there is a channel that surpasses the limits of others – and I am not talking about Christian radio or television networks. It is a channel that causes us to realize we are a part of something larger than our own messes, or our personal social and political viewpoints. He writes, "How can [Paul's answer, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ'] fit us all? ... The secret is that Jesus Christ is saving us. [note the verb's continuous tense, "is saving."] Believing it means tuning in to the highest level of the story line of what is going on. It means becoming decisively aware that our small lives are swept up into a great drama, God's story line. God is indeed reaching out to us in Jesus Christ, taking our lives into the gospel story of transformation and redemption." [Ron Cole-Turner, in *Feasting on the Word Year C, volume 2*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 526.]

Belief in Jesus is not going to ease the harshness the Romans might impose on the jailer. It will help him withstand it, supported by others in the faith community. That is part of Jesus' prayer, that all become one. Faith moves into our messes, and attempts to unbind fear so we can sense freedom, even in the midst of those messes. It is what strengthens Paul and Silas to pray and sing hymns, to worship in prison. It enables us to counter the prevailing story to fear the stranger, the outsider, particularly if our real fear is loss of fortune.

I would like to think, that when released from prison, and resting again at Lydia's house, perhaps the slave woman is there, and the jailer and his family. I would like to think we are there as well, with our different world views, but all tuned into a common channel of faith, and willing to share the messages we are receiving. I'd also like to think the doors of Lydia's house remain open, so some day, if they decide, even the slave girl's owners will also be welcome to enter a place of faith and freedom.