

Acts 16: 16-34

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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God Has Work for Us to Do

My therapist of 14 years was old school. He sat with me in silence a lot. Patiently waiting for me to speak my truth. He wanted me to discover the dynamics I was encountering in my life vs. just telling me what he saw. When I would come up with something that he knew was deep down in me, he would smile ... and slow clap. You knew when you got the slow clap you had unearthed something valuable.

The new resurrection reality shows up in these stories in Acts, and they take a little reflection to get the slow clap. But if we look carefully, there is all sorts of relevance.

For example: This story shows people being treated as commodities, only as valuable as their production. It shows a group using their power to target a foreign people in the name of patriotism and security, and an impulse to warehouse people in prison in the name of law and order, with no regard to rehabilitation.

Why, you could run an entire Presidential campaign on these ideas!

So, a story in 3 parts: The Slave Girl, The Mob, and the Jailbreak.

Part 1: The Slave Girl (v16-18)

16 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

This is a person under social and some kind of spiritual captivity.

I wonder how it was that she was sold into slavery.

Family rejection because she was “different?” Financial desperation? Orphaned?

Here’s what we know, she had become valuable to her “owners.”

Mysteriously, in the midst of all that, she spoke once, and Luke recorded it, in a way that would forever change her life. It looks like some kind of proclamation of the gospel, but who knows?

17 These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you [d] a way of salvation. 18 She kept doing this for many days.

Paul, it says, was annoyed by her commitment to repetition.

We might say of the slave girl: *Nevertheless, she persisted*. And Paul brings her some kind of liberation from her spiritual captivity. Making her less profitable to those who colonized her body.

Lesson:

It's easy for someone with my privilege to read this as a weird unnecessary story.

Yet, those in minority and marginalized communities can take solace in knowing that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is also the God of Hagar the concubine, Rebekah, Rachel, and the often overlooked Leah, Deborah the judge, Mary the brown-skinned, unwed pregnant teen who gave birth to Jesus, and in today's tale, the God of an unnamed slave girl. They can proclaim, "Hallelujah! I'm not excluded from this narrative — I'm a central figure!"

The prevailing theme in a post-resurrection world? That this God embraces all of us! No one is written out of the story! You are not written out of the story, no matter how many times you have been told you are or perceived that you are... You are part of God's story.

As Jurgen Moltman says in his book, *The Source of Life*:

Great or small, man or woman, black or white, handicapped or non-handicapped – where God is known, the differences disappear and the democracy of the Holy Spirit begins.

Part 2: The Mob (v19-24)

What we learn next is that liberation always costs. Follow the money.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas

I love it that Luke names the motivations. The Slave Girl is a picture of a thousand enslavements, where a lot of money is always to be made.

But while that seems obvious, what is said next by the “owners” is insidious, and where we learn the greatest demonic display is found not in the slave girl but in the “owners” who proclaim these chilling words:

“These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews” (v. 20).

One sentence, this sentence, captures history. Usually said by “the owners,” the ones in control of economic and socio-economic realities. Create an enemy, label them, scapegoat them, target them, incarcerate or kill them. Just another day in the Empire.

It would be negligent of me to overlook similarly targeted groups within our midst: immigrant workers blamed for “taking” jobs, members of minority religious traditions viewed with suspicion if not hostility, and transgender individuals.

Predictably verse

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.

And with that, the predictable result of mob violence stoked by fearful xenophobic declarations by people who are seeing an economic opportunity dry up is complete.

Lesson:

I was born on third base but didn’t hit a triple — that’s how I describe my privilege. I’m a homeowner, white, male, and educated. In these United States, that’s being born on third base. With a system rigged in my favor, I have every reason to maintain the status quo that benefits me. I’m likely unaware of how much my biases influence my life.

Here's the task at hand, and if it resonates with you, it's what we all must do. Deliberately utilize our privilege and influence to support others, propagate God's love, and champion God’s justice within our spheres of influence. Otherwise, we risk succumbing to the seduction of power, leading us to believe that imprisoning people is a viable solution to all problems.

We must question why we readily recognize the demons in the slave girl but overlook those that have nestled comfortably in our house of privilege.

One more thing: This story reminds us that who gets arrested, charged, tried, and convicted is very often a matter of who has access to resources or who enters judicial processes already profoundly disadvantaged. This has not changed.

As Michelle Alexander says in her book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*,

“We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it.”

We know that the United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, but it's the racial dimension which is breathtaking. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.

Paul and Silas in prison remind Jesus' followers, living in the shadow of a Savior who was incarcerated, that we understand prisons aren't neutral, natural, or normal. Guided by God's love, we believe in the potential for change in everyone (including ourselves) and reject responses like execution or solitary confinement as lacking moral imagination. It's no wonder the writer of Hebrews urges us to visit prisoners as if we were in their shoes.

Part 3: The Jailbreak

Now, this is part of the story we like. Paul and Silas pray, sing hymns, and earthquake happens, and God rescues them from jail, and even converts the jailers. Amen, let's go home!

When life gives you lemons? Pray, sing hymns, and God will intervene!

But what about those of us that have prayed and sung hymns and God feels a million miles away? “Thanks Fred, but my experience is panic, fear, anxiety and wondering where God has been all this time ...” as my child goes off the rails, as my marriage crumbles, as my job sucks the life out of my soul, as my friend won't return my calls. God doesn't always send an earthquake to fix everything, so let's just say that out loud.

But, I am glad Paul and Silas sang hymns and prayed.

So many of us can relate to this in our desperation moments, our moments of tragedy and loss, sometimes this is all we have. Pray, mumble a song, and hope.

When we sing our hymns, we join those who went before us from Paul and Silas in prison to civil rights marchers trudging the path of faith and resistance. But if you

are like me, you may not see yourself as Paul and Silas singing. I find myself as one of the prisoners listening to them sing songs I could not sing, at least at that moment.

The Lesson:

I think that's authentic, honest, Christian worship. "I'm not sure I can sing these hymns, but with everyone else, I can get by." And apparently there was enough faith going on in that jail, enough love in the midst of suffering that a hardened jailer got the same treatment as the Eunuch did in last week's sermon when he learned that yes, this good news is for him and his family too.

A nameless slave girl, finding liberation.

A couple of Jesus rabble rousers singing in jail with prisoners listening in.

A jailer discovering that God's love reaches to him and his family.

Maybe this should give us confidence that God's love can permeate your heart too, whether it's hard, sleepy, not sure, jaded, so tired. Hear Paul and Silas singing, and the people around you today, as a nudge that God's love comes to you in whatever jail you are in today.

Amen.