

Sermon for the 7th Sunday after Easter 2010

Sarah Dylan Thomas writes these words about upended relationships in the Acts of the Apostles: *A slave girl's freedom from the powers that enslaved her is bad news for those who benefitted from her enslavement. They demand that Paul and Silas be jailed for "disturbing our city" -- as indeed the two missionaries were doing. What God did through Paul and Silas upended the relationships of slave and master, socially as well as spiritually. But what if the slaveowners had received this change as a gift? What Good News might they have experienced had they received this disruption of the old relationship of slave and master as an opportunity and an invitation to experience a new kind of relationship -- indeed, a new kind of freedom? Paul's and Silas' jailer did, and the night of an earthquake and a prison break became the night that he and his family became sisters and brothers with the former prisoners, breaking bread and rejoicing.*

It's a powerful set of stories from Acts we read this Sunday, in which injustice and imprisonment give way to healing, reconciliation, and joy. These came as God's gifts, given freely, as all God's gifts are. Paul and Silas responded to grace by extending grace, freeing the slave girl, singing in their cell, and, when their jailer appeared to be ready to respond to grace as well, receiving him as a brother. Along the way, we witness powerful signs: miraculous liberation from spiritual and literal imprisonment, Baptism, the breaking of bread.

It's a pattern that repeats itself around the world as the Spirit moves among communities: God's grace in healing and reconciling moves a grateful receiver of God's gift to extend that grace to others in turn. We celebrate that grace, remembering God's work among God's people and embracing the identity that is ours in Baptism: one Body of Christ, called to Christ's ministry. God's mission of reconciliation, of making visible and tangible the unity God has given Christ's Body and is giving the world God created, is not something we engage as reluctant employees who grimaced when we got the memo; it is the natural response of those already made sisters and brothers by God's work in Christ.

Despite these words from Luke/Acts, the Church has had a difficult time living out this story. As our adult Study this Easter Season revealed, millions of God's children were baptized and given

Christian names as they were held for transport to the new world. While their baptisms meant they were released by baptism from spiritual bondage, they would now be held in physical bondage for a lifetime. For three hundred years, our forebears continued to believe that the Bible justified slavery. Whatever the century Mike Kirk reminds us of something that has not changed for many who read the Bible:

No matter how you dress it up, the real reason behind the righteous indignation of those who abuse the Bible to degrade, exploit, marginalize, or reject others is the loss of power and territory. People in power don't like to lose it. People whose power hold comes from degrading, exploiting, marginalizing, or rejecting others will try to make their cause seem righteous. It is not. It was the income from slavery that built this nation's economy and left a deep legacy of racism.

In this week's reading from Acts, Paul and Silas are thrown in jail with false religious accusations when all they did was heal someone who had been degraded, exploited, marginalized, and rejected. Their arrest, as Mike says, was really about power and territory.

Kate Huey describes the healing of the slave girl this way: This girl is a lucrative small-business enterprise for the men who own her. Like so many young girls, she is used by others, but her strange public announcements about Paul and his little band of missionaries, we suspect, do not bring much income to her owners. "These men," she cries out, "are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Her wording sounds odd to our ears, because she calls them "slaves," and refers to a God that is not her own as "the Most High God."

When the jailer asks Paul what he must do to be saved, Paul answers simply that he should "believe on the Lord Jesus." This is still a difficult question today, and Paul's answer presents its own challenges as well. Perhaps we need to spend much more time on what it means to "believe.".... Ronald Cole-Turner's reflects on this question in the context of this story and poses this question for each one of us, personally: "What must I do," he asks, "to be saved from what destroys me? What must I do to be saved from my particular bondage, my oppressive addiction, emptiness, or boredom? There are countless ways to lose our way in this world or to be in bondage, just as there are many different threats from which we need to be saved."

He also says: *One of the most powerful captivities of our age, besides materialism and militarism, is the way fear can imprison us in our convictions and our desire for security, making us unable to open our hearts and minds to others, to events, to the God who still speaks through them. How amazed the jailer must be, just as he's about to kill himself, to see that the prisoners are still there! Fear almost leads to death, but compassion leads to his life, and his family's life, being transformed.*

Cole-Turner writes that "Believing....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."

Kate Huey asks how can we read this story and not have our memories come alive with all the talk of washing wounds, being baptized, and sharing a meal? Doesn't that sound familiar to us across all the centuries, and isn't it at the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus? David Tiede sums it up most eloquently: "This story is a remarkable example of the irrepressible hope with which the apostolic movement was sustained in its encounters in the disparate and contentious urban contexts of the Roman order." The adventures continue, throughout the book of the Acts of the Apostles, and today as well, two thousand years later, in the church that claims to follow Jesus, in a world still captive, a world still hungry for good news.

Yesterday, the consecration of the first two women bishops in the diocese, one a partnered lesbian, is a bold statement by the Episcopal Church that that there is no slave nor free, no Jew nor Greek, no gay nor straight in the Kingdom of God. I sensed that Paul and Silas were there with us.