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**Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ**

The Corrupting Kingdom

*A Sermon by*

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Scripture: Acts 16:16-34

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”God is still speaking,

A few weeks ago my family and I went to Disneyland. While we were there, we had an unfortunate encounter with someone. My sister was pushing her stroller along, and a man came barreling out of one of the stores, flinging the stroller out of his way in the process. My sister was understandably upset and shaken, but luckily my three-month-old nephew was unharmed. Later that same day, my grandmother and I rode Splash Mountain. She had been having some trouble with her knees, and was having a difficult time getting out of the ride. As I returned to help her, a teenage girl who was waiting in line took her arm and offered her assistance.

As I reflected on the events of this day, I came to realize that one of the things that keeps my cynicism in human nature at bay is my belief that more people choose each day to behave as that girl did, as opposed to the man with whom we had run into before. I truly believe that more people choose to behave most often with concern for others rather than out of anger and self-involvement.

The problem is, what is often most obvious to us are those acts which cause harm and demonstrate the worst of human nature, and we don't always see that redeeming value that is present in human nature. As Christians, we are called to not only live our lives as redeemed people, but to also learn to recognize the redeeming qualities in others. This is not always easy, and often it may cause us to reconsider how we choose to treat one another.

In our scripture lesson, Paul and Silas are confronted by a young slave woman who is inhabited by a demon. This demon gives the woman the ability to read people's fortunes, and her masters have capitalized on this. The superstitious people of Philippi have made them rich men. But Paul and Silas did not see a cash cow when they looked at this woman. Nor did they see an oracle that could ease their anxiety about the future. What they saw was a human being, someone with redeeming qualities whose true value did not depend on the superstitions of others, and all this because these two men had made a decision to model their lives after a man named Jesus.

And just who was this Jesus? Jesus was a teacher of the "Good News," teaching that God cares for every one of us, and keeps caring right into eternity. He also had some strange teachings about how to live a good life. Much of it sounds impossible. Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, go the second mile, all of which seem impractical and imprudent, and many times unwise.

Friedrich Nietzsche saw this clearly. He was the son of a Lutheran pastor, and the grandson of an eminent author of religious books. But when he reflected upon the commands of Jesus, he not only said, "Impossible," he said, "Stupid!" He believed that the ethics of Jesus were for the losers of this world, those who had become doormats to the powerful who justify their weakness as the will of God.

Machiavelli, sometime earlier, had come to a similar conclusion. He believed that Jesus' teachings were impractical in this world, and therefore must be relegated to an ideal world. The only way to survive in this world was by cunning and cleverness motivated by self-interest.

But is weakness really the thrust of Jesus' teachings? I think we can answer that when we see how his followers responded to his teachings.

Paul and Silas took a bold step in liberating this slave woman from the demon that possessed her, and for their efforts they were flogged and thrown in prison. But the story doesn't end there. While in prison, they were singing praises to God, and an earthquake loosened their shackles and opened

their cell door. Yet they did not seize the opportunity to escape, for they knew that in doing so, the jailor would lose his life.

Both of these actions by Paul and Silas seem to fly in the face of self-interest. It seems that for them, to genuinely follow Christ is to put the welfare of others before their own. And this isn't a task for the weak.

And how does this play out in our modern world? How do followers of Christ take these commands of Jesus seriously, and enact them in our own lives? I believe we do this by getting to the spirit of Jesus' commands, the motivation behind them: that each person is valuable to God, and we are to respond to God's care for us by caring for others. It is this theme of redemption that is so prominent in the Hebrew Scriptures and carries forward through the teachings of Jesus into the New Testament. It is when we come to understand that we belong to God that we can begin to see the value within ourselves, and within others. We begin to take the teachings of Jesus seriously and live as though we are from another planet, or as Jesus stated, "My kingdom is not of this world." This Kingdom of the reign of God comes in and corrupts our established order, exposing our systems of greed and self-interest, calling into question our motives, and turning our world upside down. For Paul and Silas, this meant freedom not just for the slave girl, but for the jailor as well.

We've moved from the nuclear age into an age of terror. For many in our world, the new idol is a sense of security. Oh, the things we have allowed in order to gain a fleeting sense of security! But new laws and wars will never truly give us peace; nuclear weapons and concealed weapons, alarm systems and identity protection programs only feed our distrust of one another and continue to divide us. Peace will only come through harmony with one another.

We should have learned from the teachings of Jesus, and all the great religions for that matter, that our security will not come at the expense of our neighbor's welfare, but only when we are concerned for our neighbor's welfare; not by protecting ourselves from our neighbors, but by building relationships with our neighbors.

In an age of corporate greed, excessive lifestyles, job insecurity, political polarization, cynicism and nihilism, and all other forms of human angst and discontent which seem to shackle our spirits, will we continue to sing praises to God? And when we sense that freeing presence of God in our lives, which has the power to disrupt our lives like an earthquake, will we choose to escape? Or will we remain to bring that saving power to those still in bondage? For we have not been redeemed from the world, but to the world, and our redemption comes with great responsibility to live as redeemed and redeeming people.

In Ernest Gordon's true account of life in a World War II Japanese prison camp, *Through the Valley of the Kwai*, there is a story that never fails to move me. It is about a man who through giving it all away, literally transformed a whole camp of soldiers. The man's name was Angus McGillivray.

Angus was a Scottish prisoner in one of the camps filled with Americans, Australians, and Britons who had helped build the infamous Bridge over the River Kwai. The camp had become an ugly situation. A dog-eat-dog mentality had set in. Allies would literally steal from each other and cheat each other; men would sleep on their packs and yet have them stolen from under their heads. Survival was everything. The law of the jungle prevailed . . . until the news of Angus' death spread throughout the camp.

Rumors began to spread about his death. No one could believe big Angus had died. He was strong, one of those whom they had expected to be the last to die. But it wasn't the fact of his death that shocked the men, but the reason he died. Finally, they pieced together the true story.

The Scottish soldiers took their buddy system very seriously. Their buddy was called their 'mucker', and this soldier believed that it was literally up to each of them to make sure their 'mucker' survived. Angus's mucker was dying, and everyone had given up on him, everyone, of course, but Angus. He had made up his mind that his friend would not die. Someone had stolen his mucker's blanket. So Angus gave him his own, telling his mucker that he had just come across an extra one. Likewise, every mealtime, Angus would get his rations and take them to his friend, stand over him and force him to eat them, again stating that he was able to get "extra food." Angus was going to do anything and everything to see that his buddy got what he needed to recover.

But as Angus's mucker began to recover, Angus collapsed, slumped over, and died. The doctors discovered that he had died of starvation complicated by exhaustion. He had given away his own food and blanket. He had given everything he had, even his very life. The ramifications of his acts of love and unselfishness had a startling impact on the compound.

As word circulated of the reason for Angus' death, the feel of the camp began to change. Suddenly, men began to focus on their mates, their friends, and the humanity of living beyond survival, of giving oneself away. They began to pool their talents: one was a violinmaker, another was an orchestra leader, another a cabinetmaker, another a professor. Soon the camp had an orchestra full of homemade instruments and a church called the "Church Without Walls" that was so powerful, so compelling, that even the Japanese guards attended. The men began a university, a hospital, and a library system. The place was transformed; an all but smothered love revived, all because one man named Angus gave all he had for his friend. For many of those men this turnaround meant survival.

I see this as a prime example of redemption: to live one's life with a concern for others, and to introduce the corrupting power of the Kingdom of God to a system designed to keep people in chains. This is the redeeming power of God, which calls each one of us to live as redeemed, and redeeming, people, sharing a love that breaks through all chains and frees the human spirit. Amen.