

Sermon: May 8, 2016 – Acts 16: 11-40

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley

Years ago there was a form of hayseed comedy routine in which the storyteller would tell a long, drawn-out story and the sidekick would say “that’s good” to which the storyteller would say, “no, that’s bad” or the sidekick would say “that’s bad” and the storyteller would counter with, “no, that’s good.” Today’s rollicking reading from the book of Acts, which reads like the love child between an adventure novel and devotional writing, has a somewhat similar structure, with freedom and enslavement playing the roles of “Oh, that’s good” and “No, that’s bad”:

- ✓ A slave girl is possessed by an evil spirit. That’s bad.
- ✓ This spirit gives her the ability to see the future, for pay. That’s good, for her owner at least.
- ✓ Paul sets the girl free from her affliction. That’s bad for the owner but good for the girl.
- ✓ Paul and Silas, are beaten, thrown into prison, and have their feet shackled in blocks of wood. That’s bad.
- ✓ In response, what do they do? They sing and they pray. That’s good.
- ✓ In response to their songs and prayers, there is an earthquake. That’s bad.
- ✓ The prison doors fling open. That’s good for them but bad for the jailer charged with keeping watch.
- ✓ Paul and Silas and, we gather, the other prisoners stay in their cells and keep the jailer from falling on his sword. That’s bad for them but good for the jailer.
- ✓ The jailer shows kindness to them, freeing them, feeding them and washing their wounds, and he and his family are formally welcomed to the body of Christ – that’s good.

Bible Commentator Will Willimon looks at the to-ing and fro-ing of the story and writes, (p.140), “by the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free – the girl’s owners, the judges, the jailer – is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Paul and Silas – is free.”

This morning I’d like for us to examine the nature of bondage, or enslavement, and freedom. To kick things off, here’s a bit more from Will Willimon (p.136) writing about some of the unexpected consequences of our modern love of freedom:

“Freedom? Surrounded by our burglar alarms and medicine cabinet and our fears – heart attack, impotency, insanity, insolvency – this is freedom?... I have freedom of choice, but now what do I do with my freedom? We are free but also terribly lonely, terribly driven. The nine-to-five job, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed children, dog-eat-dog contests for grades at the university – this is our freedom.”

Will wrote these words back in 1988, leaving me rather impressed at how forward-looking his social analysis was. I suspect that if he were to revisit this paragraph today he might have something additional to say about the mobile enslavement of smartphones but that’s just a guess.

There is at times a fine line between bondage and freedom. Things that enhance life can have a detrimental downside to them; things we interpret as generally life-diminishing may have a kernel of goodness, or at least good intentions, within them. Unfulfilled dreams, lingering memories, misplaced loyalties, unrelenting grief – all started out as something healthy but each of them can turn into places of imprisonment.

One of the toughest blurs between bondage and freedom comes in the world of addictions. Two months ago, when we were looking at the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we encountered a remarkable essay by Debie Thomas, written “to the boy who ran,” in which she referred to the prodigal son as “the hungry one.” That letter helped us to see that at the core of our compulsions, addictions, obsessions, driven-ness and inflexibility, we are seeking, desperately, for a deeper meaning that call fill our personal emptiness. We correctly see holes, gaps, emptiness, and we know that SOMETHING should be there – and then find a really destructive way to feed the hunger. It is a deep yearning for freedom that finds answer in enslavement.

In today’s story from the 16th chapter of Acts, we see a comparison with what everyone thought was freedom, with the true freedom that Paul and Silas had been granted in Christ. They were imprisoned for lessening the cash value of a slave girl, but the leg shackles of the prison held no power over them – the Romans could shackle their bodies but not their spirits. Then they had the opportunity to run away but that wasn’t freedom to them; they could only be free if those around them were truly free, and they immediately saw the consequences that would befall the jailer if they were to just walk out the door. So they stayed, and reassured the jailer that his death would not be a good thing for them. Even though the details of the story are quite fanciful – I do wonder what Paul himself, who was no stranger to imprisonment, would have said about this version of the story if he’d ever had a chance to read it - there is a noteworthy message here, re-setting for us what it means to be enslaved, and what it means to be free.

So far this morning, I’ve been looking at slavery and freedom mostly as figurative terms. But all of the action that evolves in Acts 16 begins with actual, literal slavery, and an attempt to free a young slave girl from her exploitation. While the writer of Luke-Acts focuses on the spiritual nature of what was happening, and the girl’s enslavement to an evil spirit, the reality is that this tormenting Spirit made her a most valuable commodity to her owner, and by releasing

her from this Paul was costing her owner/pimp quite a bit of money. To my mind that is the true locus of evil in this story: that this girl had become a commodity rather than a person.

Paul, acting in the name and power of Christ Jesus the liberator, took the first step in setting her free. But what would happen next? Lutheran Pastor Janet Hunt writes this: "Even after having been 'set free,' freedom in its truest sense would likely have been elusive for this girl. Indeed, presuming her owners now let her go, I'm not sure she would have had any kind of chance at a normal life without some sort of support. From her family, perhaps, if they were still alive or if they even wanted her back. Or maybe that community of others who had also experienced a kind of 'setting free' once they knew themselves embraced and empowered by the love, the forgiveness, the hope that was theirs as they followed the Crucified and Risen One." Janet concludes with these words: "The story doesn't end once freedom is realized. Rather, a community is needed to help those of us, all of us, who find ourselves formerly enslaved, [now] newly 'free,' to move into the fullness of what God intends."

Indeed, as a community of faith we are called to support one another in our journeys from enslavement to freedom, whatever enslaves us, whatever we are freed to. I think I would be remiss, however, in this reflection on slavery and liberation, if we didn't consider the ongoing reality of slavery in our world.

I don't think I'm particularly easily shocked, but a week ago I came across a story that brought me up short and made me deeply ashamed of what people are capable of doing to one another, and in particular, the shameful behaviour that men can inflict on women. The story was about a police raid that has closed a huge brothel in a seaside town in Lebanon, where seventy-five Syrian women had been imprisoned for as long as three years as sex slaves. Seizing the opportunity of the terrible situation in Syria, the predators running this place were paying a maximum of \$4,500 to "buy" these young women from their penniless, desperate families, or as little as zero, by luring young women from the war-torn Syrian countryside to leave the bombs and gunfire behind for a new life and new job as restaurant workers. While the women have now been freed and are receiving health and trauma counselling, their next steps are sure to be challenging.

A bit more reading revealed that while there are no longer any nations in the world where slavery is legal, the last nation to outlaw it, Mauritania, only did so in 1981; slavery only became a prosecutable offense there in 2007 and as of 2012, a grand total of ONE person had been convicted. In spite of the laws, an estimated 10-20% of the population of Mauritania still live as slaves, and the practice of giving a slave as a wedding present is widespread. Part of what keeps the practice alive, is the self-understanding of the slaves themselves: they've been told since birth that the only reason they exist is to serve others, and there is no evidence in their lives that runs contrary to this.

And so this becomes part of our work, as members of the body of Christ. In addition to supporting one another as we seek freedom from those enslavements that diminish life in any way, we are called to keep our eyes open to the realities of human trafficking and all forms of slavery. And while it may go without saying, we particularly open ourselves to the plight of women and girls, who face so many extra layers of challenge and violence within these situations. In case anyone is feeling particularly called today to work directly with agencies fighting against human trafficking, you'll find a link to ACT Alberta [<http://www.actalberta.org/>] on our Facebook page, or you can check with other NGOs that you are connected with, to see if they are doing similar work.

Throughout today's story in the book of Acts is a deep concern for the wellbeing of all, the affirmation of their personhood, and a desire for new, unfettered life: Compassion and an offer of freedom are extended to the slave girl; Paul and Silas do not put the jailer in an untenable situation; the jailer shows great compassion to these Christian leaders, at great personal risk.

There are times, as followers of Jesus, when we are called to put ourselves in harm's way - and even when it is not that dramatic, we are always called to be people of Christ's radical, brave, inclusive love. When we do so, we emulate the way that God relates to the world, and in fact participate in the unfolding of that Divine love. Our commitment to be set free from those things that enslave us, and to accompany others as they seek their freedom, will very much define who we are as individuals, who we are as a Church, who we are as a community. As we prepare to share Christ's meal of reconciling love, may a commitment to true freedom for all, and true abundance for all, be strengthened within us. Amen.

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