

Acts 16: 16-34
May 8, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

Reason 278 for why I trust the Bible:

Coming back from Tucson where so many people are compassionately committed to human beings at risk of dying in the desert and being deported back to countries where their lives are in danger, I was excited after skimming this story from the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

For here is a classic case of economic exploitation: a slave girl is possessed of a supernatural spirit. The spirit is not evil. It appears to allow the woman to tell the future. As a result she is able to tell people what will happen in their relationships, illnesses and business investments. She is a great source of revenue for her owners.

Wouldn't it be great if Paul and Silas saw the woman as a human being with a name and a story! Wouldn't it be great if they had confronted the owners of this slave woman with their exploitation and injustice! What if they spent time actually speaking with the woman and listening to her! What if they inquired about her past and her dreams of the future? What if they offered her the opportunity to receive the love of the Lord Jesus Christ and connected her to Lydia—the woman who had come to faith through the preaching of Paul and who was leading the congregation in Philippi?

BUT NO! When Paul acts it is out of annoyance. He is tired of being followed around the town by this creature who keeps shouting, "These men are slaves of the Most High God!" So

when orders to this spirit to come out of her he just wants to get rid of her. She irritates him. He wants her to shut up and go away.

I trust the Bible precisely for stories like these. Paul is a real person, not a stained glass saint. He gets tired. People get on his nerves. There are days when he doesn't have time for irritating people, no matter how needy or oppressed they may be. He is not Jesus. Yet even Jesus had a day like this.

Every now and then I have those wonderful moments when I actually catch a glimpse of people as God might see them. But most of the time my responses are filtered through a tangle of reactions. They come from past history, a person's tone of voice or facial expression. Sometimes I see a person and I think I already know what they will say or do. It is humbling how often I treat people as problems to be solved, referred or ignored. It is humbling how often I find myself thinking, "Life would be so much easier if such and such a person would disappear." When I recognize that I am responding to a person as a problem or a threat to my serenity, I am brought to my knees with the realization that I have kicked God out of the center of my life and taken his place. I must also say that these moments almost exclusively happen when I have not been taking care of my physical, emotional and spiritual life. It is then that I realize that all of my frustration and irritation culminates in the great plea to no one in particular, "What about *me?*"

Paul got his perspective back almost immediately. The enraged owners of the slave woman had him and Silas arrested severely beaten and thrown in jail. Of course the reasons for the arrest were pious: "They are corrupting our cherished Roman values." But they were actually mad about having lost their source of income.

What distinguishes Paul from the ordinary tired and grumpy person is how he responds to the consequences of exorcizing the spirit from the slave girl. Hanging in stocks and racked with pain from the beating, Paul and Silas are not licking their wounds and nursing their sense of injustice. They are praying and singing! Go figure that out! My take is that they recognized that they had done the right thing for the wrong reason and now they were suffering for their faith. They were bound and determined not to let the rod of Roman punishment crush their spirits. Their prayer and song were acts of rebellion; a witness that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is powerful far beyond the ability of governments to inflict suffering of the body and soul.

Then comes the miracle. No, I do not mean the earthquake that opened the doors to their cell. The miracle comes when the jailer, assuming his prisoners had escaped, was on his way to killing himself. He hears Paul's voice from the cell telling him to stop. He goes to the open cave and sees Paul and Silas. They didn't run away! They remained in captivity. He is astounded. The way of the world dictates that prisoners escape and their guards are held responsible. It has never happened that prisoners who had the chance to escape remain. *They have kept their lives in jeopardy and saved the life of their captor.* Later Paul would leverage this event to expose the greedy people who had used the slave. This is precisely the kind of non-violent witness which brings social and economic change. It is why we revere Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr and mark the death of Daniel Berrigan.

But for my money the real change happened to the jailer. His life had been saved by his prisoners. He wanted to know why anyone would do such a thing! Paul and Silas then told the jailer about Jesus. I imagine that Paul helped the jailer make a connection between his life being saved by his prisoners and Jesus, who also did not run away. I imagine that Paul and Silas spoke

of the One who not only did not run away from the worldly punishment for his beliefs, but who allowed the sentence of death to be carried out. I feel certain that Paul and Silas helped the jailer understand that when Jesus allowed himself to be condemned and killed he did so to save the lives of the very people who had arrested him, taken him to court, condemned him and called for the death penalty. People like this jailer who was doing his job in a large and impersonal system over which he had no influence.

The message from Paul and Silas to the jailer would have been clear. "You are a child of God. God does not see you as an instrument of oppression worthy of condemnation. God sees you with compassion and yearns for you to discover that you are a human being for whom Jesus died. And what is more this Jesus has risen from the dead. Receive a new name. You are Redeemed! You are not a cog in a big impersonal machine; you are a free child of God. You are no longer Jailer; you are now liberator of souls bearing Good News!

It is evident to me that as powerful as the message is, it would not have had the anointed power of persuasion if Paul and Silas had not remained in captivity for the sake of the jailer. It was their living the very life of Christ that brought new life to this jailer and his family.

If this is so the question becomes, "How do we do that?" I do not know. But I do this, if we pray daily for the opportunity to identify our lives with Jesus completely and utterly as did Paul and Silas, we will get our chance. Amen.