

“We As Well As Me In Matters of Faith”

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, May 8, 2016
Seventh Sunday of Easter**

Readings from Scripture: John 17:20-26 and Acts 16:16-34

Jesus said, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

John 17:20-26

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. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, the jailer put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Acts 16:16-34

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, you offer us your word to nourish and to challenge. May today we wrestle with and listen for your word to us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The passage that Tom and I just read contains really two stories; of being held captive and being set free, of healing and helping. Last week Tom preached about the man waiting by the pool to be healed. Jesus talks with him and invites him to pick up his mat and walk, and he did and the man was healed. In this case he was set free of his past. However, what Jesus did made the religious leaders furious. But it wasn't about the healing, it was about doing the healing on the sabbath.

So today we hear another healing story. The story of a young slave girl--she is someone possessed; possessed both by a demon and her slave owners. She is captive in body and spirit. Her owners treat her as less than human, as if she were a money-making machine. At first glance it might seem that we couldn't relate to this story in some way, but maybe we do things without even realizing it, that are similar. As I read this, I recalled a time when I went to be with two friends one afternoon and Lorraine came in all excited because she was going to be moving to another home. But she was beginning to get very anxious about everything that had to be done before that move took place. My other friend, Marlys, said, "I can help. Bring the kids over for a couple afternoons. It'll give you some time to go out and do the things you need to do." I thought to myself, "Great idea. I could do that too." And then Marlys said, "And you can have Sheila for two weeks. I won't be needing her." And I thought, "What do you mean, you can have Sheila for two weeks?" I knew who Sheila was--she was the cleaning lady. Marlys' words were so impersonal. No one talked about speaking with Sheila. No one asked for her opinion or her desires or even her permission. It may not have seemed like a big deal, but it was as though they talked about her as a non-person.

And that's the same thing with the slave girl. We can only speculate on the background of her story. Was it her illness that led her family to sell her into slavery? Was she an orphan? We really don't know. But what we do know is she had some ability to foretell the future and her owners loved having her around because she made them money.

So we read that Paul and Silas, as they move about town, are followed by this young woman. They are sharing the good news and she is yelling loudly to everyone behind them that they are here to speak words of salvation. The NSRV version that we read this morning tells that Paul is "annoyed." He is "very annoyed" with all of this. It appears that he has had enough, because he suddenly turns around, calls out the demon in her and she is healed. But once again we find the healing is not well received. Her owners are furious. Their money machine is broken. They go to the town leaders, raise a ruckus and they say these men are trouble makers who promote actions that are not Roman. The crowds join in and soon Paul and Silas are rounded up, beaten and tossed into prison with very strict instructions to the jailer to keep them locked up.

In last week's reading of the healing, Tom noted that Jesus first asked the man if he wanted to be healed and then he challenged him to take the steps he needed to heal himself. It reminds us at times we just need a push to keep ourselves from being trapped by the past so that we can move forward into a new future. I think there is a little bit of difference in this healing today. There are times when someone needs more than a push. Sometimes others need to do something to help them get the help they need in order to move on--the kind of help I think about in the story of the Good Samaritan.

However, Paul doesn't ask the slave girl anything, he just calls out the demon and she is healed. What's really going on? The passage uses the word annoyed, very annoyed. So could it be he just wanted her to shut up? It's a normal human response to somebody following you around saying things day after day after day. (And to all you kids here, don't use the words 'shut up'.)

I was interested in exploring this more. I looked up other versions of this bible passage. It doesn't say 'annoyed,' nor do they use the word 'irritated'. The word in Greek is διαπονηθεῖς--*diaponetheis* only found twice in the Bible. It's roots are *dia* which is 'on account of' and *ponos* which is 'labor, anguish, suffering or distress'.¹ So maybe more contemporary versions interpret this quite differently. Or maybe there are two ways of looking at it. That the annoyance was with the slave holders and their callous indifference. Or was it that Paul was so concerned about this young woman, he did what he could do to set her free? Regardless, once she is healed, trouble starts. She is now no longer worth anything to her owners and they cause quite a stir. So because Paul is thrown in jail, we can only wonder what else Paul might have done for her.

The irony I find in this story is that Paul is locked up for freeing someone else. But it doesn't stop here. At midnight, we heard, a great earthquake shook everything so hard that the prison doors opened up and the chains broke. The jailer is distraught because the last thing the city leaders did tell him was to make sure they didn't escape. So out of fear, he prepares to take his own life, sure that they have done just that--escaped. We can only wonder if Paul sensed what was happening, because he calls out words of assurance in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself. We are all here." Did Paul understand what would happen to the jailer and didn't want him to take his life? All we know is that the jailer's response is palpable. He is so moved he trembles and he falls down before them and then he brings them outside. He sets them free and says, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they share the good news with him and his household. The jailer responds by using water to wash their wounds and then he and his household are washed with the waters of baptism and then he takes them home and gathers them around the table and they break bread together and they all rejoice.

I'm struck that, as so often happens in scripture, we find a world turned upside down. Those who are jailed are set free. Those who have been held hostage by their own fears are set free. Paul's actions save the jailer's life--not just spiritually, but literally. We, too, live with tensions of being held captive by our emotions. We struggle. We see that some walk freely in the streets but it's because they are homeless. We may be free in one sense, yet held hostage by our anxieties and fears. Paul and Silas were held captive in body but not in spirit. Their faith had set them free, and unexpected things happen.

Last weekend someone shared a story with me about how when she once reached out to someone in need, she got far more in return. She said one year at Christmastime, the staff talked about buying presents for a family in need instead of buying presents for one another. My friend agreed to be the one that was going to be in conversation with the family. She learned the ages of the children, about some of the things they needed for their home, some of the clothing they needed. She said the staff responded with incredible generosity. They added a mound of food for Christmas and beyond and a lot of other gifts for them to enjoy. "By now," the woman said, "I was getting to know this mother. Her name was Marie. So one day I called Marie to arrange for a time to drop off the gifts and we began talking about a lot of other things. I said, 'what do you do for a living?' and Marie said, 'well, I work at one health facility during the week and on the weekends, I work late nights at a different job. My children don't want me to work on the weekend but I have to catch up. I'm far behind on my bills from the three months I was out of work.'" "So what do you do at night?" She said, "I take care of people at the health care center if they have something they need during the night." "Which one?" she asked her. And when Marie told her, she was stunned. It was the very place that both of her parents had been living for the two previous years. The more they talked the more she realized that Marie had been very much a part of her life and she hadn't even known it. She was the nurses' aide her parents had told her about, the one who was so kind and helpful. My friend said, "My mother has anxiety attacks, usually at night. And my father always tells me that if Marie is there, she'll help calm her down. I'd never met her because it was late in the night."

She said, “There I was thinking I was helping someone who needed hope and healing from debt and to bring Christmas to her children. But God works in amazing ways. My parents and I were being helped by someone who offered my mother healing through offering words of comfort and peace. My faith tells me about the importance of giving, but so often I have found when we give, we receive more in return.”

So it was with the young girl acknowledged by Paul as a human being, and a jailer who was saved in body and spirit. Set free, he washed away the wounds of Paul and Silas and they washed him with the waters of baptism. Then the jailer broke bread with them at his table, feeding the very prisoners who had set him free. And so may we give freely from our hearts in word and deed so others might experience healing and hope. May we do it in the name of the Son who makes us one--one body. Amen.

1 From biblehub.com interlinear Greek bible and their use of Abingdon's Concordance.