

“We met a slave girl...”
A Sermon for the Federated Church of Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, June 2, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Acts 16:16-34

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, he 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. Freedom offering God, we come to you each Sunday with chains of all kinds holding us down – mental anguish for many reasons, physical pains and disease of our own or those we love, prisons of spiritual unrest or doubt. Unlock the chains that bind us, O God. Show us new ways of considering and living through times of great difficulty and many questions. Amen.

Our text for today has all the makings for a blockbuster movie, or at least a mini-series on TV. The first segment could be about the unnamed slave girl and her powers of divination, or today we might label her a person with severe mental illness who never received proper care and understanding.

We could witness the interchanges between her and Paul, who was so important and *driven* in his role as the first known champion of the Christian faith to those who were not

Jewish, the Gentiles. The story tells us that he somehow missed the significance and the passion with which this young girl spoke of *him* and of what he had to offer those who were wandering in their faith. She cried out, “These men are slaves [or servants] of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17) But Paul became annoyed at her, and silenced her by ordering “the spirit” to come out of her. What was Paul afraid of in this innocent young girl’s words?

We wonder, I wonder... what was she left with, once her spiritual powers were taken from her? Her masters surely were angry not only at Paul for shutting up their source of ill-gotten income, but at her, too. They probably made her life even more miserable than it already was... as a piece of property, a thing to be worked, in our time perhaps considered as an “illegal alien,” valuable for the cheap labor she could provide, but not valued as a person to be honored as a child of God or cared for in her poverty and mental illness.

The next segment of our TV mini-series could focus on the slave girl’s owners and all in that Roman center who wanted nothing better than a scapegoat or two to take the focus off their illicit and immoral activities – Paul and Silas would do just fine as their scapegoats. “Throw the bums into jail,” they chanted in so many words. And so that is what happened. Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten and thrown into prison... for what? Upsetting immoral and illegal apple carts that didn’t turn over easily, then or now.

What causes mobs of people to do and to say what they wouldn’t have the guts to do or say one at a time, or in our day without the anonymity of a computer keyboard and a worldwide cyberspace network of fellow haters to support them? We wonder, I wonder... what did they think about when the darkness of night settled in and they lay in their beds concocting their next angry, death-dealing deeds? What were they afraid of in the presence and words of Paul and Silas?

And the final segment of our TV mini-series could focus on the prison scene... First bringing into sharp image the jailer... whose task it was to keep Paul and Silas securely locked behind bars, so they could not create any more disturbance for those who believed Paul and Silas were a threat – a threat to their comfortable sense of hateful superiority.

Then bringing into focus the other prisoners who were listening to Paul and Silas as they prayed and sang hymns. Would they have been amazed at these two men who seemed not angry, but joyful in their circumstance, shackled and imprisoned unfairly? Or would they have thought these two must be crazy themselves, filled with demons who made them sing and pray?

And then the infamous earthquake happens, and “the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened.” (Acts 16:26) Just imagine the sound and visual effects of the modern day TV, movie or computer screen when an earthquake happens in the story. Hollywood knows how to do this stuff dramatically and too realistically at times for my taste! If you consider the number of times earthquakes bring amazing turnarounds in life and in death in the stories of the Bible, we might wonder about the number of earthquakes the world is experiencing now and ponder what that might mean in the greater scheme of things.

In our story from Acts, the jailer runs in, sees that Paul and Silas have been unchained and thinks he needs to kill himself or be killed when his magistrates find out he hasn’t done his job. But Paul shouts in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer calls for lights, [an interesting note since there obviously was no electricity in those days and surely the earthquake would have caused all the candles and torches to have been lost, but nonetheless]

the jailer calls for lights, and rushing in, falls down trembling before Paul and Silas. He brings them outside and says, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:27-30)

What a scene! Earthquake and fear, the thought of death and destruction bring one face to face with God and the bottom line question of life, “What must I do to be saved?” Saved from what? Losing one’s job? Losing one’s family? Losing one’s honor? Losing one’s health? Losing one’s life?

Paul and Silas answered the jailer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” (Acts 16:31) In our day, there are many who identify themselves as Christians who truly believe that unless a person accepts Jesus Christ as their personal savior they will not be saved from their demons and they will not go on to be with God when they die.

It is a particular understanding of the Christian faith that has drawn many to it – usually in fear and trembling... and many away from it – in disgust and disbelief. I fell into the latter category for the first half of my life. I simply couldn’t believe in a God who would sanction the idea that some are “in” favor before God and some are “out” of favor before God.

I was reading a piece a while back by Janet Silman, a Canadian writer, entitled “Are All Religions Equal Paths to Knowing God?” Just a few paragraphs from it now: “Jesus himself comments on religions in the dispute between Jews, who identified God with Jerusalem, and Samaritans, who worshipped God on Mount Gerizim, by stating, ‘God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth’ (John 4:24). [Gospel writer John also tells us] Jesus said, ‘The wind/spirit blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes...’ (John 3:8).

If our view of Jesus as the Christ blocks us from seeing all religions as equal paths to knowing God, then the issue may be with how we understand Jesus as Christ. With the Trinity, [Janet Silman writes] I think we should start with the Holy Spirit. First, we acknowledge the freedom and unbounded mystery of the Spirit, then as Christians we see that mystery incarnate [in the flesh] in Jesus.

In the 18th century, John Wesley [one of the founders of the United Methodist tradition] drew on scripture, church tradition, reason, and experience as sources in Christian discernment. [It’s known as the ‘Methodist quadrilateral’ and I’ll be offering some sermons around that concept this Summer.] [Silman continues,] using these four sources leads me to believe that the Holy One is free to relate to us by limitless paths.

Hence, all religions are avenues by which the Source of Life may communicate with us. This does not mean that any religion is exempt from abuses and untruths. But that is equally the case for Christianity as for any faith.”¹

So the trailer for our TV mini series could be stated like this: Paul and his companions met a slave girl... an earthquake of the holy was unloosed... and heaven was opened to those who would choose to believe in a just and all encompassing compassionate God.

Let the people say, “Amen.”

¹Janet Silman, originally printed in *The United Church Observer*, January 2008, and reprinted in *Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life* for Sunday, May 16, 2010, p. 125.