

(Acts 16:16-34 NRSV)

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely.

²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ 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.

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A More Certain Freedom

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge,
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Text: Acts 16:16-34

I was brought up, as I suppose most of you were, to be a respectable citizen. I was also brought up to be a reasonably good Christian.

But the more I read the Bible and hear the stories of Good Jews and Christians, I'm less and less sure being an honorable citizen is fully compatible with being true to one's faith. At least it seems that a number of Biblical heroes were otherwise not well thought of. The prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel were thorns in the side of the government. Jesus himself was crucified because he was a rabble-rouser. He bothered both the Jewish and the Roman authorities to the point that neither wanted him alive. And Paul traveled all over the Mediterranean planting churches, and just about everywhere he went, he got thrown in jail.

In this morning's passage from Acts, Paul is still in Philippi, where last week we heard about his conversion of Lydia and her household. Down at the place of prayer, where they had gathered before, there appeared a young slave girl who had a special demon. She was something of a psychic. She could tell the future, and her owners made a great deal of money selling her fortune telling services. She was understood to have been possessed by a demonic spirit.

I'm not sure about spirits of this sort, but I am sure that knowing the future would be a demonic talent, or better, a demonic sentence. Imagine knowing in advance horrible events like the shootings this week in Oregon, or who will die in the next earthquake or hurricane, or in the next car accident. No thank you.

Anyway, you need to understand a little about demonic spirits to understand what happened next. Otherwise it probably doesn't make much sense. The slave girl, or her embedded spirit, follows Paul and the others around screeching: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She does it this day and several following days as well. And Paul becomes annoyed. That seems odd, doesn't it? Why would he be annoyed by all this free advertising? It turns out that demonic spirits scream out the truth when they are defeated. So the demon recognizes that Paul's message of the gospel is true and cries out in defeat, not exactly an advertisement, more of a vanquished rage.

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So Paul grew tired of it, and, one hopes, had compassion on the young girl, and finally ordered the demon out of her.

Then things grew sticky. The young girl's owners had a fit. Paul had ordered her demon out of her, and she was no longer psychic. Suddenly the owners saw their cash cow become utterly useless.

Suddenly, in their eyes, Paul had become a bad citizen. He had devalued their property. It didn't make any difference that he had saved the girl from her affliction. It didn't make any difference that he had slain a demonic spirit. What mattered was that he had threatened their economic condition, and that was an improper thing to do.

The owners brought Paul and his companions before the magistrate. They were charged with disturbing the city and fostering unwanted customs. That is, by showing compassion toward the girl and faith in God, they had undermined the economic situation that depended on keeping the girl demonic, no matter that her owners were taking advantage of her. The magistrate easily found them guilty, had them severely beaten and then had them thrown in jail.

To have been a good citizen would have meant letting well enough alone. Being a good Christian meant removing the demon and liberating the girl from its influence. Paul chose to be the good Christian and was beaten and jailed for his choice.

This part of the story raises questions for us, does it not. It suggests that being a good citizen and being a good Christian aren't always as compatible as we would like. It reminds us that there are consequences, some of them harsh, to choosing one's faith when the two are at odds. And because most of us prefer to avoid harsh consequences, I can't help but think the story keeps asking, where have you chosen to leave well enough alone, where have you chosen to turn your eyes away from injustice, where have you allowed the currently accepted state of affairs to continue, even when you have known full well that your faith, when you have known full well that your God, when you have known full well that your conscience has demanded something else of you? I feel the text asking me, poignantly, what demons have you left in place today just because it was the easier course? Asking me, what demons have you left in place today just because it would have disturbed the peace to have removed them? Asking me, where have you today preferred to be nice rather than faithful? Asking me, where have you chosen today to remain silent rather than risk the threat of rejection or imprisonment? In countless places, in countless ways I am certain I must answer.

*** Paul had no such compunction, it seems. He was driven by his faith, and for it he was willing to be beaten and jailed. For it, like many before him, and many after him, we learn he ultimately gave up his life.

In considering Paul's sacrifices, I believe we must be cautious not to draw the wrong conclusions. Unfortunately, many Christians have been told it was their bounden duty to suffer at the hands of another. Many of the women in battered women's shelters have been taught that they should stay with their husbands, no matter what. And very often they are told this on the basis of Christianity. They are told that staying with their abusive husband is the right thing to do, and that they should suffer the pain and make the sacrifice, because God wants them to. And now that these women have sought refuge in the shelter, they experience enormous guilt. In choosing to seek safety, they believe that they must either reject their faith or be condemned by it.

But Paul is talking about something else. It's a little tricky to get one's mind around. But there is a big difference. And it has a different starting point.

Paul met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. The risen Christ appeared before him, and it set Paul on a religious adventure of gargantuan proportions. From persecutor of Christians, he became one of their preeminent leaders. From seeking to wipe out the Christians, he became the foremost planter of churches that had ever been seen.

The story of Paul, once he has become a Christian, begins and ends with his religious faith. Everything he does he does because of his faith. And why? Because his faith has given him a freedom that exceeds any other possible.

Today's passage is a powerful statement of that freedom. Paul has been beaten and thrown in jail on account of his compassion for the slave girl. As he and Silas pray and sing in their cells, the earthquake comes. It breaks down the walls. It opens the doors. It undoes the chains. But no one escapes. They just stay put. Paul stays put because he has already found his freedom in Christ, far greater freedom than walking out of jail will ever give him. And because he is functioning out of that freedom, he is not a victim, but a prime actor.

Take Paul in prison bound in chains on the one hand and a woman bound and quivering in the confines of a battering relationship on the other, and who is most free? There is no comparison. And to suggest that the woman should stay and suffer as a good Christian is to misrepresent the whole situation and the whole reason Paul stayed in prison when he could have escaped. Paul already had his freedom. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to develop and nourish that freedom. It is not meant to further abuse those who know little freedom as it is.

The story of Paul in jail is meant to encourage the development of one's faith and experience of Christian freedom. The fact that Paul is so free as to stay put after the prison is open becomes a witness to the jailer and his whole household. For they know they have seen a faith more powerful than stone walls and steel chains. They have seen a freedom so extraordinary that it cannot be contained. That is Paul's message, just as it is the message of Easter morning, and just as it is

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the message delivered by people of faith throughout the ages. The message of freedom that cannot be contained.

This message, this faith, this freedom, which cannot be contained is ultimately what gives us the courage to choose rightly when following our faith and following the outlook of our culture stand opposed, when we must choose between following our faith and rocking the boat. Whether you talk of Paul in his century or Martin Luther King in ours, or the many in between, or the at least a few since, when you look into the eyes of those who have fully experienced the freedom the gospel grants, you know, you see the evidence of a more certain freedom than any which can be granted by this world.

For them it becomes an easy choice. Do you remove the demon from the slave girl even though it will anger those who exploit her? Do you stand for justice even when it will get you in trouble? Do you do what is right rather than what the polls tell you the prevailing winds of public opinion want? Grounded in the expansive freedom of a well nourished faith, the answer may be yes. For the freedom found in faith has no deception in it. The freedom found in faith is more complete and more certain than all others. The freedom found in faith will make you free. None other really can. Thanks be to God. Amen.