

On the Inside

Acts 16:16-40

June 2, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

This week's Scripture was so long we broke it into two pieces, but it all seems important and all goes together. It follows, loosely, from last week's reading but comes back to connect to it at the end. Last week, Paul and his companions, whoever they were, encountered Lydia leading a group of people at the place of prayer, just outside the gates of the city of Philippi. Lydia and her whole household were baptized, and Paul stayed at her house. It sounds like he may have even made her home his home-base while he was in Philippi, and it sounds like he stayed there for a while.

As it happens when you are in a town, or even in a big city, for a while, you start to run across the same people in your travels about town to run errands. And Paul and his companions, one of whom is finally named Silas in this section, have run into this same slave girl around town. And it seems like it might not be accidental. She is doubly enslaved, first by a spirit of divination which allows her to see things that others cannot. This spirit has not been a blessing to her, but rather a curse, because it has led to her second enslavement, by her human owners who use her spirit to make money for themselves. She can see exactly who Paul and his companions are, and she follows them around town for many days, calling out constantly, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" Over and over and over and over.

This is not the first time we have heard of a spirit who can see exactly who someone is. In the story in the Gospels, when Jesus casts unclean spirits into a herd of pigs, the man with the spirits shouts at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" The spirits see truths the humans cannot or will not.

Rather than being moved by compassion, as Jesus was, when he released the man from the unclean spirits, Paul is moved by how annoyed he is that this slave girl keeps following him around town, and he commands the spirit to come out from her. It's not one of his finer moments. Although he has released the girl from one enslavement, to the spirit of divination, she is still enslaved by her human owners. And now that she can't make them any money with the spirit's powers, she is now more vulnerable to the evils that might befall any other enslaved girl. I wish I could tell you that something miraculous happened to her,

that she was freed from the second slavery, too, but she disappears from the story completely. We never find out what becomes of her.

It turns out that she is not the only person who is a captive, who is enslaved, who is on the inside of something they can't get out of, in this passage. The narration follows Paul and Silas. The girl's owners get angry, because Paul has just ruined the best money-making scheme they had going. And they know just how to get revenge. The girl's owners take Paul and Silas and literally drag them before the magistrates. Their complaint is not that Paul has ruined their money-making scheme. Their complaint is that Paul and Silas are disturbing the peace of the city, because they are Jewish and are not only practicing but encouraging customs that aren't lawful for Romans. This is a little odd, because it was legal for Jews to practice their religion in the Roman Empire, but they were viewed with suspicion.

The angry men must have been persuasive in their argument, because the crowd joins in, and the magistrates order that they be stripped and beaten and thrown in jail, in the most secure part of the cell and held down in the most secure way available.

So there Paul and Silas are, held captive in maximum security prison in Philippi, all because Paul got annoyed with a spirit telling the truth about him. One would think this might be the end of the story, but it gets stranger.

Around midnight, Acts says, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. And the other prisoners were listening to them. I'm not sure that I would have been appreciative of their singing at midnight, but apparently the other prisoners are happy to listen. All the sudden, there's an earthquake and the prison's doors are popped open and the chains break. The prisoners could have escaped, because the jailer had fallen asleep, probably during the singing of the hymns and had somehow slept through the earthquake.

When he wakes up and sees the cell doors are open, he is about to kill himself. I hadn't thought about this, but in my reading this week, a commentator challenged me to stop and think about this.¹ How messed up is this system that is holding the jailer himself captive, that making a mistake combined with a natural disaster would be such a horrible transgression that he would immediately move to kill himself? What kind of punishment is he expecting to receive? As many people are, he is trapped in a system. This system doesn't see him as a human, nor does it see the prisoners as human. He believes death his only escape from the consequences of his mistake.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4056

But Paul stops him and reassures him that all the prisoners had stayed put, that his mistake would not be known, and so he will not have to face the consequences. The jailer, I'm sure, can't quite believe this. He talks with Paul and Silas, they tell him about Jesus and salvation. He takes them to his home, cares for their wounds, feeds them, ministers to them, really. He and his household are baptized, just as Lydia's had been earlier.

As an aside last week, I said it would be important to the story later that Paul was a Roman citizen and therefore entitled to benefits and privileges that non-citizens were not. Here's where that becomes important.

I'm not sure what has transpired to change their minds, but the magistrates send the police to the jail to tell the jailer to let Paul and Silas go. The jailer tells all that to Paul, who again refuses to leave when he could. He says, nope. They've mistreated us in public, and we are even Roman citizens, and now they want to keep it all hush-hush and discharge us quietly? No way. They need to come themselves and parade us out with the same fanfare that we were brought here.

This word moves back up the chain, jailer to police to magistrates, who are horrified that they've treated Roman citizens in such a manner. Let's stop again. One would hope that they would be horrified to treat any human being in such a manner. One would hope that Roman citizenship wouldn't make one human life more valuable than another. The magistrates are held captive in the same system that holds the jailer captive. It's not at all clear that they wish to be freed from this system.

The magistrates come and apologize, and Paul and Silas leave the jail, to return to Lydia's home, to bring the chapter full circle.

There's a lot going on here, a lot of people involved, a lot of people that are wrapped up in things they can't get out of by themselves, a lot of people imprisoned in systems and situations that are bigger than they can tackle, a lot of people who might not even recognize freedom if it were offered to them. A lot of people who are prisoners, not just inside a jail but on the inside of themselves.

I think we understand that kind of imprisonment, all too well. We're held captive by all kinds of things. Addictions. Making enough money to pay for the things we think we have to have to be considered successful. Systems that are so big and complicated we can't figure out how to exist apart from them. Systems that work well for people that look like me, or people that have enough money but are oppressive and dangerous for people who don't look like me or people who don't have enough money. Some people in the world are held captive in the

very same ways that the girl was, owned by other people who exploit and mistreat them.

It's hard to measure if one imprisonment is worse than another, or equal to another, if a prison of our own making is as bad as a prison that someone else constructed around us. I don't know how to measure that in any objective way, but on the other hand, I think the feelings of being imprisoned, of being held captive of things bigger than our control, of not being able to escape no matter what we do, may be the same. The helplessness and hopelessness are universal.

And imagine how astonished we would be, if a way out presented itself, in the form of a stranger releasing our demons, or an earthquake setting us free, or someone telling us about Jesus. Jesus told us at the very beginning of his ministry in Luke, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19).

What we can say with certainty is that imprisonment and slavery and captivity are not the work of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is freedom and release and good news. Let us go forth and do the work of the Spirit made known to us in Jesus Christ.