

“Breaking Chains”

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Texts: Acts 16: 16-34 and John 17: 20-26

William Willimon, in his commentary on the book of Acts writes a powerful interpretation of this story of Paul and Silas in jail, a mentally challenged slave woman they “set free,” her owners, the people of Philippi, the jailer. Wow! There is a lot going on here. I will be borrowing from Willimon a lot in today’s sermon. I almost thought about just sharing the whole commentary with you, but you are more than welcome to read it anytime you’d like (William H. Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation Bible Series*, 1988. Pages 136-141). Just a note, this commentary was written in 1988. In this politically charged environment, where even the freedom of the pulpit may be challenged, this is not a new commentary. We’ll begin where Willimon ends, “At Philippi it was demonstrated that there is freedom and then there is freedom.”

Paul and Silas are on their way to a place of prayer and were accosted by a slave woman. She could tell peoples’ fortunes, reading palms and providing entertainment at business conventions. Her owners made a lot of money off her “skills.” It is likely that she was possessed by a demon, in biblical language, or suffered some kind of mental imbalance in our language. She is the picture of enslavement. She was a slave to her bosses, in the grip of mental illness, schizophrenia, some “demon” which held her in bondage. She follows the men around and eventually Paul tires of it and in the name of

Jesus cures her. We can speculate all day about what happened and what we believe about it, but for today she is finally free!

Or is she? If you think she's free you forget about her owners.

The Bible is full of stories of healing that didn't turn out well for the healers. There is the story of Jesus healing a mentally challenged person by casting demons into swine (Luke 8:37); for this act of charity, he was promptly escorted out of town by the local Pork Dealers Association. At Ephesus, Paul had a big revival, and many were converted, and it was all wonderful – except for the members of the Local 184 of the International Brotherhood of Artisans of Silver Shrines to Artemis (Acts 19:23-41). This woman, in our story, chained her whole life to the hell of demon possession, and now she is free; there ought to be rejoicing. But no, her owners are not free enough to do that. It was fine to give a dollar to the Mental Health Association drive last fall, but this is another matter. Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so her owners do what the vested interests always do when their interests are threatened. The owners claim that they have no problem with religion—as long as it's kept in its place. They don't say their financial self-interest was threatened; they say their nation is threatened. “These missionaries are foreigners,” they claim.

And they are Jews, so they put nationalism and antisemitism together. Just for added measure, they also talk about tradition and how these men are disrupting tradition. Then the crowd, *democracy* in action, falls into line behind the business leaders of the town; and they attack and beat Paul and Silas. The liberators are imprisoned, locked by

their feet in iron shackles. Jesus said, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free (John 8: 32).” You know where he ended up.

Once imprisoned, Paul and Silas hardly are languishing. Instead, they sing, pray, and have a sort of rally. The earth begins to shake (we have no idea if these two things are related). The doors fly open, and everyone’s chains fall off. The jailer, feeling responsible, prepares to take the noble act of suicide for his dereliction of duty. You know, having the key to someone else’s cell does not make you free. Iron bars do not a prison make.

Paul and Silas scream out to him, “We’re still here!” The jailer, perplexed, wonders why those freed of their chains are still present. They were free to escape! The jailer then asks what he must do to be free.

What is freedom? By the end of the story, those who appeared to be free – the girl’s owners, the judges the jailer – is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved—the poor girl, Paul, and Silas—is free.

All of us desire to be free, and for the freedom of others. As we approach our nation’s 250th birthday, we all – to some extent—have been told our freedom is being challenged. While you may believe that one side of the political aisle is more responsible than the other for your freedoms being taken, it is put before you every day whether you are freer than you were yesterday. While human rights are clearly a part of that freedom discussion. It is also true that there is freedom and there is freedom.

Perhaps you have political freedom, but financially you are not free. Perhaps you have financial freedom, but you are afraid to share what you believe for fear of retribution.

Maybe you feel religiously free, but held back because of your gender, or sexual orientation. Maybe you have freedom that comes from your gender or orientation but are held back by your mental health. The point is that we often believe that we are freer than we really are. And, I think, we also look short-term when it comes to freedom. While it may not always be the right choice to stay in your cell when the chains break, Paul and Silas saw something that most of us miss. In fact, I think they lived a freedom that many of us aspire to.

It's counter-intuitive – again! This faith we profess and this Jesus of whom we speak challenges us to think beyond what is right in front of us. Are we really free? And if we are, what are we to do with our freedom? Once freed, Paul and Silas had a decision to make – what to do with their freedom. In their case, it made sense to use their freedom to free another. Where we are free, do we use our freedom to free another? The slave owners were free (from one perspective), but they chose to keep someone else in bondage. “It is our livelihood!” they exclaimed. Making money off someone else is never right, and yet more of us do it than we want to admit.

This story from Acts is a challenge, to be sure. But even more challenging is our other scripture this morning. Jesus prayed, “I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. I’ve given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.” When the world becomes as one, then the world will know that Jesus came and loved the world just

as God loved him. That's a tall order when we find more and more and more ways to say not only what is different about another, but what about them is less than us. Bondage comes in many forms, but perhaps the greatest form of bondage is making yourself better at the expense of another.

Yes, there is freedom, but then there is freedom.