

Something There Is That Doesn't Love A Jail

Acts 16:16-34 *About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake....*

Paul and Silas are traveling through Greece spreading the gospel about Jesus Christ and God's saving love. One day a slave girl starts following them around. She has a spirit of divination. She sees deeply into things. In some of the gospel stories, demons see in Jesus the ultimate power of God; they realize their days are numbered. But that's not what's happening here. The spirit in her is not threatened by what it perceives in Paul and Silas. This young woman has a spiritual gift, and her owners are making a nice profit from her gift. The girl follows Paul and Silas around for days, crying out that these are "slaves of the Most High God, and they are announcing a way of salvation to you." She really knows what they are about.

Finally Paul can't take it any more. This girl has plucked his last nerve! In a fit of irritation, Paul casts out this spirit. This is a strange part of the story. Paul is just like us, getting irritated and responding out of lower motivations. He's not trying to demonstrate the supremacy of God's spirit over the lower spirits so that others might come to faith. Paul is just plain irritated and wants to get this girl off his back. The story does say something about the reign of the one God over the whole spiritual realm.

This story sets up what happens next. Paul's actions have unintended consequences. His and Silas' devotion to the spiritual realm—being slaves of the Most High God—has social, economic, and political consequences. The girl's owners are enraged that their source of income has been cut off. They drag Paul and Silas before the authorities. They are not charged with having destroyed someone's business. They are charged with being Jews who are disturbing the Roman peace. Rome didn't mind having Jews around. There was a certain tolerance of different religions and cultures in the Roman Empire. However, the Roman fist could come down very hard on anyone who appeared to threaten Rome's absolute control over society.

The hearing quickly turns into an anti-Jewish demonstration. The crowds join in reviling these Jews. Paul and Silas are flogged and sent to prison. The jailer is ordered to make them secure. The story takes pains to show just how secure—they are put in the "innermost cell" and their feet are fastened in stocks. The message is clear: Paul and Silas are in the most hopeless of situations, from a human point of view. They are locked deep in the belly of the prison system. The situation of Paul and Silas is that of anyone who is or feels caught in hopeless circumstances.

Have we ever found ourselves in situations that feel hopeless? We see no way out, no hope for relief or a solution. The metaphor of being in prison describes well these experiences. In such times we are vulnerable to despair about life, about God, about faith. We feel up against a wall, not knowing where our lives are going, sensing no direction. Former purposes have played out and we

feel stuck. Something has happened to us or those we love that has casts us into prison. An illness. The loss of a job. A personal or family crisis. Or it may be the prison of our own troubled and anxious spirits, when we feel locked into old and habitual patterns of thinking and living that cause us suffering.

Prison is not a metaphor for so many people in our society and world. The literal prisons of this country are disproportionately filled with those who are young, poor and black, who become more desperate and full of anger and depression. There are the literal prisons where torture, humiliation, and killing are justified by ideology, politics and religion. There are the prisons of poverty. The single mother living in the inner city, trying to earn enough to keep her children fed and clothed, having no health care for either her children or herself. Or the young man who happened by the Festival Center the other day while I was outside cleaning windows. Unemployed. Without a permanent home. Drifting into alcohol abuse. Gifted. Bright. But not knowing where he can turn. Prisons are everywhere. And when you feel like you are in prison yourself, life itself seems to be just one big prison.

Come midnight, Paul and Silas are deep in prison, their ankles beginning to chafe in the stocks, sitting in total darkness. And what do they do? They start singing and praying together! Now, that's something none of the commentaries I checked out made much of. But it grabbed my attention! The text doesn't tell us what they were praying for. Nothing indicates they were crying out to God for help, like in the psalms—"Out of the depths, O God, I cry unto thee!" They just start singing and praying. Two guys, with no one to hear them but others who are in the same dismal boat, singing and praying! That's something worth thinking about.

I think that Paul and Silas sing and pray because that's what you do when you're in some kind of prison. Sing, pray, worship. These are things that connect us with the deepest level of existence, that open us up to that unseen dimension of life, beyond the tangible, beyond the present circumstances that seem so hopeless and despairing. What did African American slaves do when they were locked in the hopelessness of slavery? They sang and prayed. They found ways to sneak off into the woods and fields in the nighttime hours and worship. Singing and praying together opened up a wellspring of hope and life in a situation of despair and death. Their songs connected them with a joy and freedom stronger than chains. Their songs became protests. Their songs hid the directions to the place of worship or the way north to freedom. When you sing and pray, you remember that you are more than the situation you are in. You are more than fear, more than despair, more than your feelings of hopelessness. You remember that you belong to a power greater than what put you in prison. You touch that depth of life that gives you your real identity and power. And through it all, ways open up. Something there is that does not love a jail or prison of any kind, literal or metaphorical, physical or emotional, political or spiritual.

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast...
"Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down..."* (Robert Frost, "Mending Wall")

Robert Frost knew it. Poets know it. Artists know it. Scientists are beginning to perceive it in their equations and their microscopes. People who live by the spirit know it, who train themselves in the work of prayer, inner listening, and singing the songs of God. The church can know this Power and be its instrument, provided we keep ourselves from being part of the wall making and the prison building. When we are feeling ourselves in prisons of any sort and when we are trying to be on the side of those in prisons of any sort, then our worship becomes something real and life giving. It is the touching of that Power that loves neither walls nor prisons, that works to bring people together and bring people out.

We can imagine those other prisoners listening in, drawing some hope and comfort from the prayers and songs of these two fellow prisoners. We never know whose life is going to be lightened, brightened, given a bit of hope because we sing and pray, because we are faithful in the inward journey of our relationship with the living God. As I drove away from the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky after my first retreat there in the late 1970s, I thought, "I am glad this community is here, devoted to prayer and silence and listening, lifting up the whole world in its life of prayer." It gave me hope and encouragement. We have prayer daily at the Festival Center. So far there are only two or three of us gathered there. We long for the time when others might come to find in the few minutes of quietness and prayer a strength, peace, and comfort. But we keep at it because it is important that we are there, first for ourselves because we need it. And then for others who may or may not know we are there.

So the earthquake comes. Staying in touch with the spiritual dimension of our lives will always bring an earthquake, some opening, some sliver of light to pierce the darkness. A door opens or maybe just one chain falls away. Again, remember that we don't know that Paul and Silas were praying for any such thing to happen. I think they were praying and singing just because they needed to pray and sing to God, because they needed to stay grounded in that deeper reality of life. But the thing happened. Something always happens, either within us or around us, some slight or great break in the wall or shaking of the prison.

The first thing the jailer thinks about when he sees the doors flung open is that all the prisoners have escaped and he will lose his job and maybe his life. He's in a prison, too, the system of hierarchy and coercive, violent power. So he takes his sword and prepares to do himself in. But Paul and Silas are still there in the dark, their feet unshackled. Paul yells to the man to stop, for they haven't escaped.

I like this turn in the story very much. Paul and Silas only had to waltz right out, free as birds, praising God for saving their necks. But they didn't. This is compassion. They aren't concerned with just their own freedom. They are concerned for others and their freedom, their lives. Rather than go their merry way, Paul and Silas stay as free persons in the prison in order to help someone else. This is worth our contemplation and understanding. For here is the heart of the Gospel of God's love in Christ. God's liberating love is for us, yes, but also for all people. We are to use the freedom of God's love in our lives to seek the freedom of others.

In Buddhism there is the figure of the *bodhisattva*. The *bodhisattva* is one who is on the path of enlightenment, the Buddhist understanding of salvation, but who forgoes his or her own final achievement and turns to help others along

the way. Salvation is not just for oneself but also for all creatures. God's liberating love is not just for us but also for all people.

Paul and Silas remain in their prison for the sake of this jailer in his prison. They talk with him about God, about salvation, about the deepest things of life, things more powerful than nations, than prisons and walls, things that have to do with real life, true life. The jailer takes Paul and Silas out to the courtyard to wash their wounds. Then he takes them to his home for a meal. The jailer and all in his home are baptized into this new life. Our portion today ends with these words: "He and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God." They, too, had become "slaves of the Most High God," thus truly free. The jailer had been helped to find in his own life that connection to what is eternal, what is beyond the walls and chains of life, the way of true freedom.

As we contemplate this story, we might reflect on these things:

- 1) What are my prisons? Where do I feel trapped, confined, and hopeless?
- 2) Am I working at the deeper level of life, my spiritual life, singing and praying my way into the deepest joy and freedom there is?
- 3) Am I alert to see a wall beginning to crumble, a door beginning to open, a chain dropping away from my life?
- 4) How is God calling me to live out of that freedom for the sake of others in their prisons?

Prayer:

Keep us singing and praying, O God, so that we stay grounded in you and your love and power, so that we keep thankful and joyful hearts. Help us to be truly free because of your love and to use that freedom to be in community with those who are languishing in prisons of their own.
Amen.