

May 12, 2013 / Seventh Sunday of Easter / David L. Edwards

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....

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul and his partner in ministry Silas are traveling through Greece with the message about Jesus and the way of God's love. While in the city of Philippi, they encounter a slave girl who starts following them around. She has a spirit of divination, and is exploited by her owners. As she follows Paul and Silas, she cries out that they are "slaves of the Most High God, and are announcing a way of salvation." She really sees what they are about. She is enslaved by those who exploit people for material gain. Paul and Silas are slaves, or servants, of God. Right here we are given something to ponder - what it means to be enslaved by or to a world of dehumanizing values, and what it means to be a servant, or slave, of the God of love who created the universe and is present everywhere in it.

Paul, however, is not happy with this free publicity. The girl is getting on his nerves, so finally he casts out the spirit. This is a humorous part of the story. Paul is just like us. He gets irritated. He doesn't cast out the spirit to demonstrate the supremacy of God, so that people would believe. Paul just wants this girl to go away, to give him some peace.

Paul's action has unintended consequences. The girl is liberated from from her owners. Being servants of God, or slaves of the Most High God, has social, economic, and political consequences, intended or not. The girl's owners have lost their source of income. They drag Paul and Silas before the local Roman authorities, on the charge of being Jews who are disturbing the Roman peace. Rome was tolerant of different religions and cultures in its empire. However, if any got out of hand, the Roman fist came down hard.

The hearing turns into a riot. Paul and Silas are flogged and sent to prison. The jailer is ordered to make them secure. So he puts them in the "innermost cell", their feet fastened in stocks. Paul and Silas are in a hopeless situation, from a human point of view. They are locked deep in the belly of the prison system that serves all the other dehumanizing systems.

There are all kinds of prisons. Prisons of despair, depression, worry, anxiety. Feelings of

hate, guilt, anger, fear, that we allow to take over our inner life. Anything that leads us to feel locked down, closed in, cut off from life. There are the literal prisons of this country, filled disproportionately with those who are young, poor, and black, who in prison become more hopeless and full of anger and violence. There are the prisons of poverty. The single mother working one or two jobs, trying to earn enough to keep her children fed and clothed, having no health care for her children or herself. Prisons are everywhere. And when you feel like you are in prison, life itself seems to be just one big prison.

It is now midnight, and Paul and Silas are deep in prison, sitting in total darkness. And what do they do? They start singing and praying together! They worship! That's something none of the commentaries I've read made much of. It grabbed my attention. The text doesn't tell us what they were praying for, like praying for help, as in the psalms—"Out of the depths, O God, I cry unto you!" 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--things that open us to the heart and source of life, that connect us with the sacred dimension of life, beyond the inward or outward circumstances that seem so insurmountable. What did African American slaves do when they were locked in the hopelessness of the slave system? 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 sustained them in the present and opened up a wellspring of hope for the future. Their songs connected them with a joy and freedom stronger than chains. Their songs were protests. Their songs hid the directions to the place of worship or the way north to freedom. Secret worship and escape were part of the same conspiracy of liberation. Songs and worship kept enslaved people connected to the Power more powerful than the slave system, and which would win out.

When you sing and pray, you wake up to the reality 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 which gives you your truest 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. Children know it. Scientists are beginning to perceive it in their equations and their microscopes. People who live by the spirit know it, who commit themselves to the work of prayer, inner listening, all that we call the inward journey, as individuals and together as a community and as study or mission groups. It is how we open our lives to the Power that loves neither walls nor prisons, that is always working to bring people together and bring people out.

Singing and praying and worship—these are the most radical things we can do as people of faith, as human beings who are growing in awareness of the spiritual, sacred essence of life. It keeps us open to God, to the bigger picture of things. It draws us out of our small selves, awakening us to our larger Self that is related to God and all God has created. It connects us to God, the power of life and love, so that we become channels and instruments of that power. So many times through the years I have heard someone say, I just didn't feel like coming to worship. I was so down or unhappy or sad or whatever. So I say, that is precisely when you need to be part of the community in worship. It keeps you connected. It opens you up. It frees your spirit from the prison of self into which you have been thrown. This is why a membership commitment in this community includes the discipline of worshipping with the community. We do it whether or not we “feel” like it. Why? Because it is good for us. Because there just might be an earthquake.

So the earthquake comes and throws open the jailhouse doors. Staying in touch with the spiritual dimension of our lives always brings an earthquake of some magnitude or other, some opening, some sliver of light to pierce the darkness. I don't think 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, to stay grounded in that deeper reality of life. Yet when we do that, something always happens, some slight or great break in the wall or shaking of the prison, inside of us or around us.

The jailer is overcome with fear, because he failed in his duty. He's in a prison, too, the system of coercive, violent power. He takes his sword to kill himself. Paul calls out to him: It's okay. We haven't gone anywhere. We are still right there. I like this turn in the story very much. Paul and Silas could have waltzed 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. Here is something else worth contemplating. It is at the heart of the Gospel of God's love in Jesus. God's liberating love is for us, yes, but also for all people. We are on this journey of awakening to God's love not only for ourselves but for 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 in order 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, all creation.

Paul and Silas remain in their prison for the sake of this jailer in his prison. They talk with him about God, about salvation, which means healing or becoming whole. They talk about the deepest things of life, things more powerful than nations, than prisons and walls and systems. The jailer washes their wounds and takes them to his home for a meal. He 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.

I wonder if you or I are feeling like we are in a prison of some kind, some way we feel trapped, confined, or just stuck. I wonder if we are working at that deeper level of life, singing and praying our way into the deepest joy and freedom there is. I wonder if the prison we feel ourselves in might point us back to the renewing of our inward journey, making time every day to open our lives to God. I wonder if there is not already a door beginning to open, a chain dropping away from our lives, and we just need to pay attention in order to see it. I wonder how God is calling each of us to claim the freedom and love God gives us, and to use it to be with or help others in their prisons.

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