



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

“Bound in Love”

Scripture – Acts 16:20-34

Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson

Sunday, June 2, 2019

“What must I do to be saved?” It is a potent question from an unlikely character.

As this passage from Acts begins, we might expect this question of Paul and Silas. They have been stripped and beaten in the marketplace, and now find themselves locked in the innermost cell of the jail. They are in a desperate situation, wounded and physically bound. So it might not have surprised us to hear this question from their mouths: “What must I do to be saved?”

But, of course, they already know the answer. Paul, the apostle, and Silas, a leader in the church, have already found salvation in Jesus Christ. They already know the joy and the hope that comes with believing in the Lord.

Hence, we find them in the jail at midnight, praying and singing hymns of praise to God. Even in the darkest hour, Paul and Silas are at peace; they are free from fear, for they are bound to Jesus Christ, the one who sets us free. They are spiritually free ... and soon they will be liberated from their chains as well. Suddenly there is an earthquake “so violent that the foundations of the prison are shaken.” The doors fling open, the chains fall off, the prisoners are free. It seems that the cosmos itself is testifying to the liberating power of Jesus Christ.

As we see throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus’ mission is one of emancipation. At the start of his ministry, Jesus announces: “God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18-19). And here, in the sequel to Luke’s Gospel, we see this mission enacted as Paul and Silas are liberated. In this brief moment, their physical reality mirrors their spiritual reality. Those who stand free in Christ also stand free from their chains.

But, how quickly the freedom of some reveals the bondage of others. When the jailer wakes up to find the prison doors wide open, he immediately draws his sword to kill himself. The jailer is gripped by fear so real — so suffocating — that the only option he sees is suicide. What is it that drives him to this point of desperation?

We have already learned that the jailer is under strict orders to guard these “high security” prisoners. Our passage tells us: “After they [the magistrates] had given [Paul and Silas] a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” The jailer has followed his orders, he has done his job, and yet the two men who had caused such fury in the marketplace have now escaped ... or so he thinks.

And so he draws his sword, for in this moment of failure he sees no way out except for death. The jailer is bound — he is imprisoned — by his own sense of duty. To make matters worse, it is duty in service to a system that strips people of their God-given dignity, their full humanity.

The jailer is expected to turn his back on his fellow human beings. When Paul and Silas come to him, they have already been judged as different and wounded for that transgression. The crowd has complained about them, saying “They are Jews, and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” Do you hear it? ‘They’ and ‘us.’ ‘Us’ and ‘them.’ “*They* are not like *us*.” So the Roman crowd and the Roman magistrates attack the Jewish Paul and the Jewish Silas; they strip them and beat them and hand them over to our dutiful jailer.

Roman society expects the jailer to preserve this distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them.’ “They” are accorded no dignity, no respect. The jailer is expected to ignore their wounds and their nakedness and to lock Paul and Silas away. In his freedom, he is to keep them bound; in his power, he is to keep them powerless.

But now the earthquake has shaken the very foundations of the prison, and turned this system upside down. In a flash, the jailer realizes *he* is the one who is in chains. The freedom of Paul and Silas reveals his own bondage.

You know, the jailer’s dilemma makes me wonder: Are *we* bound in ways that we do not recognize? Perhaps we, ourselves, are imprisoned by a sense of duty, or by the fear of making mistakes. Maybe it is our need to remain in control that keeps us in chains. Perhaps, like the jailer, we too are bound by something larger — by social systems that expect us to turn our backs on our neighbors, or social networks that cultivate distrust and division. Could our chains be labels of race or class or gender? Or religious tradition? Or political persuasion? Does privilege or prejudice limit us and shackle others? What are the prisons Jesus breaks open today?

Thank God we know of another way. When we gather together to pray and sing hymns of praise to God, we can feel the foundations start to shake. And maybe we too give voice to an anguished yearning: “What must I do to be saved?” What must I do to foster healing and wholeness for myself, my community, my country?

When the jailer learns that the prisoners have *not* fled, he rushes in and falls down, trembling before Paul and Silas. “Sirs,” he cries, “what must I do to be saved?” Of course, we know the answer: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Emancipation! Like Paul and Silas, the jailer finds freedom in Jesus Christ. No longer is he chained by distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ free and bound, powerful and powerless. For now, in Christ, they are bound in love to one another, and compelled to turn toward one another in love.

The jailer flings wide the doors of his home and his heart, and extends hospitality to those who are now brothers. He brings Paul and Silas outside the prison and welcomes them into his house.

And then comes my favorite part ... After Paul and Silas have spoken the word of the Lord to all in this household, the jailer does something we might find surprising ... he does something that, I think, illustrates the extent of his transformation: he turns to Paul and Silas and washes their wounds. The wounds that he would have previously ignored, he now gently, lovingly cleans. This is but the first gesture of mutuality – for the one who washes the wounds of Paul and Silas is then washed in full. The jailer and his whole family are baptized and welcomed into the family of God. A meal is shared, and all rejoice that they have become believers. Through the Word proclaimed, through the bath and through the table, the seeds of faith are planted in the city of Philippi, and the church grows as people turn toward one another in love.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus prays: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.” In John, Jesus prays for unity. And here in the Acts of the

Apostles, we see Jesus' prayer realized as Roman and Jew become brothers in Christ. As the Holy Spirit loosens bonds and breaks down barriers, people turn toward one another in love and become one in Christ.

At its best, this is the church: a community of people who become family in Christ. When we hear the Word proclaimed, when we gather around the baptismal font or the communion table, when we join together in service, we can see Christ's prayer for unity realized.

In the book *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove writes about "Living as Community." Jonathan is a minister who lives in the Rutba House – an intentional community in North Carolina. To open his reflection, he describes this community's tradition of sharing a meal on the Sunday after Thanksgiving:

Our annual Thanksgiving feast is a good reminder that we're really just a big family, extended beyond the ties of biology because we've become brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Before dinner we gather in the living room with sparkling grape juice in Mason jars to remember the past year and toast the good gifts God has given us. I look around at the faces and wonder how we ever got together. A carpenter who used to teach English. An ex-con who works the door at a blues club. A single mother who cleans up at a nursing home. A mother of three who shares kid duty with her husband while they're both in graduate school. A college student who lived at Rutba in high school, home for the holiday with two new friends. A computer analyst. A retiree. A six-month-old baby.

This is the community God has given us. We're black and white (and shades between), rich and poor (according to the IRS), formally educated and streetwise. We're an odd bunch – a 'peculiar people,' you might say. Maybe an act of God is the only thing that could have brought us together. We raise our Mason jars to give thanks and sing a classic from our neighborhood church: 'Thank you, Lord ... You been so good ... I just want to thank you, Lord.'¹

My siblings in Christ — this is the community God has given us. We're black and white (and shades between), rich and poor (according to the IRS), formally educated and streetwise. We root for rival teams. We find ourselves on different sides of the political divide. And, still, we gather here, in this place, as one family. Like those of that church in Philippi, we are united in Christ, nurtured by the Word and the font and the table – bound to each other in love, which is the freedom we find in Christ Jesus.

Great Thanksgiving – Sudie Niesen Thompson

Adapted from a prayer from the Book of Common Worship, © 2018 Westminster John Knox Press

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Eternal God, we praise you for all your works.

You created the world and called it good

and made us in your image to live together in love.

¹ Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "Living as Community," in *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*, edited by Dorthy C. Bass and Susan R. Briehl (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 54.

You made a covenant with us,
and even when we turned from you,
you remained ever faithful.

Thank you, O God, for sending us your Son.
He lived among us and told your story.
He healed the sick and welcomed sinners.
He shared our pain and died our death,
then rose to new life that we might live,
and all creation be restored.

God, we long for a creation restored –
a creation where the terrors of violence no longer haunt our public life,
where peace flourishes within our communities,
where all know the fullness of your love.

Remembering your boundless love
revealed to us in Jesus Christ,
we break bread and share the cup,
giving ourselves to you
to live for him in joy and praise.

Gracious God, pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these gifts of bread and cup.
By your Spirit unite us with Christ and one another
until we feast with him and with all your saints
in your eternal realm of justice and peace.

We lift this prayer in the name of your Son,
our Lord, who gave us words to pray: **Our Father ...**