

“Jailhouse Rock”
Acts 16:16-34
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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7th Sunday of Easter
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Introduction

Last week’s scripture reading from Acts describes Paul’s first meeting with Lydia in Philippi. This week’s scripture continues the story. Paul and Silas encounter those people in the city of Philippi with money and political power. And it is not a pleasant encounter.

Scene 1 The slaveholders exploit the prophetess (the slave girl)

A slave girl interrupts Paul’s prayer meeting. Various translations say she was possessed, or was a psychic, or a fortuneteller, or a prophetess. A literal translation is that she was possessed. The idea is that this poor slave girl is possessed by a spirit, one translation says an evil spirit. And one of the gifts of this spirit is that it can predict the future. Some of us say we must take this literally.

Others of us might say that she is just one of those very direct people who doesn’t mind telling you exactly what she thinks, even if it is hurtful. Even if what she tells you inflicts pain. None of us want to hear what the future has in store for us. We may know the future, but we don’t want to be reminded of it if that future is painful, or if changing our ways to prevent that future is painful. Case in point. Certain habits which cause cancer. Those engaging in those habits do not want anyone to tell them to stop. They already know the consequences, but do not want to stop their habit. Another case in point. I think by now almost everyone accepts we are having global warming. But those prophets who told us this were and are irritating, aren’t they? Because most of us want to continue driving to work in our personal carbon dioxide producing vehicles instead of mass transit, thank you very much. This second view is that the slave girl is less involved with predicting the future and more involved with truth telling.

But yet a third idea is that the story of the slave girl is told because of its theological subtext. This girl is enslaved by entrepreneurs who care nothing for the welfare of the girl. Only for the money they can make from her truth telling or predicting the future. We don’t have to look far for an example of modern day slavery.

The brothels in Memphis made the headlines this week. Apparently, a large number of the women in the Memphis brothels are not there voluntarily. Their bodies are bought and paid for by their owners. They live in shame, and in fear

from their owners if they do not perform their work. Their owners provide room and board, and safety, but only if they do their work. Some of you may say, how can we have slavery in our day? Others of you may say, how did we ever have slavery? Opra Winfrey gave a commencement address this week. She reminded us of something Harriet Tubman said. Harriet Tubman was an African American who took thousands across the Mason Dixon line in the underground railroad. She said she could have taken many more thousands to freedom if only she could have convinced them they really were slaves.

If only the slave girl could have reflected, recognized the raw deal she was getting, and run away. But she did not take the time for reflection. She did not take time out for prayer. So it is with us. Sometimes we also are enslaved by fear, shame, despair, and bitterness, and don't even know it. We are possessed by our emotions. We are enslaved by our emotions. We do not take time out for reflection. We leave the radio booming when we could be taking time with God while driving to work or to school. We are enslaved and don't even recognize it, because it is part of our nature. We are enslaved by fear, shame, despair, and bitterness. We are enslaved by our emotions. But there is something else which also enslaves us.

Scene 2 The slave owners and magistrates imprison Paul and Silas

Some of us would say the slave holders want justice. Paul has ended their ability to exploit the slave girl, the prophetess, and they want justice. Perhaps Paul cast the evil spirit out the slave girl. Or perhaps he shocked her into being less of an irritating prophet, that is, to share truths but to wrap them in compliments so the truth is less stark, less abrasive, and more palatable.

However it is that Paul changed the prophetess, her truth is now less lucrative. So her bitter, vengeful, owners trump up a charge of teaching heresy, teaching the wrong creed. And they call the Philippi magistrates. Magistrates who in turn call rod carrying sergeants. Sergeants who strip and beat Paul and Silas. Who then shackle Paul and Silas in the innermost cell of the Philippi prison. They imprison Paul and Silas under false pretenses. Those with money seize Paul and Silas, and turn them over to those with political power. On their first visit to Europe, Paul and Silas go to prison. No lawlessness in Philippi! Especially when you make the wrong people mad!

At a recent Guatemala missionary conference near Baltimore, an elder from the First Presbyterian Church in Guatemala City says two kinds of people inflict suffering in Guatemala. Those with power, and those with money. She is speaking of the politically corrupt who arrange for political executions. And she is speaking of the inner city drug lords fighting their perpetual turf wars. Now before you start worrying about us, Stella and I will be in the rural countryside. No politicians and no drug lords fighting turf wars there. The elder from Guatemala City was speaking about the inner city. In the inner city, two kinds of people inflict

suffering. Those with money and those with power. It was the same in Philippi. Some say it is the same here in the US.

Money and political power imprison us. So do the other trappings of our culture, of our society. Trappings such as addiction. Trappings such as the opinions of those with money, and the opinions of those with political power. Our culture, our society, imprison us as surely as our emotions. When some read today's scripture, they see an historical account about a slave girl losing her annoying habit of being too direct, of Paul and Silas' imprisonment, and of the change in heart of the jailor. For others it is about Paul casting out evil spirits, and about a miraculous earthquake. But for yet others, today's scripture tells us how we get off the merry go round of emotional and cultural entanglements. About how we get out of the ruts in which we move. About how we get outside the box, the prison box created by our emotions and our culture.

Scene 3 Through God, Paul and Silas free the jailor

Not too long ago, I had to tell a family that their mother and wife was not going to survive her hospitalization. The family was upset, as any of us would be. Their mother and wife was in a coma. They asked if continued medical care would be helpful or was futile. It gave me great pain, but I told them it was futile. They asked me if their mother and wife could hear them talk to her. I told them, I was not sure, but probably. The family politely asked the nurses and us physicians to leave the room. As we closed the door, we saw the family of 12, with husband, children, and grandchildren crowd around the bed. And they began singing hymns of the church. They began singing hymns of resurrection into a new life. And the music coming out of that room was the sweetest and most uplifting I have ever heard.

The magistrates and sergeants shackle Paul and Silas in jail. But do Paul and Silas slander the folks who put them there? Do they wallow in self pity? Do they irritatingly count all the injustices inflicted upon them that day? They certainly have every right to feel despondent, ashamed, afraid, and bitter. But let's reflect on what scripture says they do. Why, they pray! They sing hymns! Their bodies may be imprisoned, but their spirits are not. In addition to Psalms and other church hymns, I think they were singing Elvis Presley's jailhouse rock!

Sad Sack was a sittin on a block of stone
Way over in the corner weepin all alone.
The warden said, hey, buddy, dont you be no square.
If you cant find a partner use a wooden chair.
Lets rock, everybody, lets rock.
Everybody in the whole cell block
Was dancin to the jailhouse rock.

Shifty Henry said to Bugs, for heavens sake,

No ones lookin, nows our chance to make a break.
Bugsy turned to Shifty and he said, nix nix,
I wanna stick around a while and get my kicks.
Lets rock, everybody, lets rock.
Everybody in the whole cell block
Was dancin to the jailhouse rock.

The point is, Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God. They pray and worship God. When situations outside their control imprison them, they get in touch with God. That's what prayer does. It sends a taproot down into the living water that is God's nourishing and replenishing water of life. Some of us would say the earthquake so shook up the jailor that he became a follower of Jesus' way. Others would say the earthquake either happened coincidentally during Paul and Silas' version of the jailhouse rock, or it was merely a metaphor and never happened at all. But others would say the facts surrounding the earthquake are unimportant. The important point is the theological subtext, that the earthquake heralds and predicts the real miracle, the transformation of the jailor. The jailor who witnessed Paul and Silas' version of the jailhouse rock. Their jailor feels whatever gives Paul and Silas solace in their adversity is something he wants for himself. He wants self-worth to replace the shame of imprisonment, love to replace the bitterness, joy to replace the despair, and courage to replace the fear. Paul and Silas are no longer paralyzed by shame, bitterness, despair, or fear. Through prayer and singing, God fortifies Paul and Silas with affirmation, love, joy, and courage. The jailor wants some of that. Some scholars think the English word "saved" is a loose translation of a Greek word that should instead be translated into the English words, "healed," "made whole." The jailor asks what he needs to do to be made whole. Once again, some scholars think the English word, "believe" is a loose translation of the Greek word that should be more properly translated, "trust." Paul and Silas answer the jailor simply, "Trust in Jesus, and your trust will make you whole."

On one level this is the story of the miraculous rescue and salvation of a slave girl. On another level, it is the story of the imprisonment and miraculous release and salvation of Paul and Silas. And on yet another level it is the story of the miraculous release and salvation of a jailor imprisoned in his own prison. The irony is the imprisoned Paul and Silas are really free, and the jailor is really the one who is imprisoned. In a dramatic role reversal, Paul and Silas hold the key to the shackles binding the heart of their jailor. Some of us would say the miracle here is not the earthquake, but is a change of heart. A change of heart to which God might also be calling you.

Conclusion

Exploitation, and shackles on the heart, Harriet Tubman, and jailhouse rock, We are not saying all emotions are unhelpful. Compassion, love, and joy build us up and make us whole. But you and I can be trapped and enslaved by the

emotions of fear, self-pity, and bitterness. You and I can also be enslaved by cultural trappings of addiction, money, and political power. But there is a third influence besides the duality of nature and nurture, besides the duality of emotion and culture. A third influence which can unlock our shackles and release us from the duality of nature and nurture which imprison us.

That third influence of course is our triune God. The God who gave us birth in the first place, who then came down from heaven to be with us, and finally, who at this very moment, is between and within us. The triune nature of God is not rocket science. I think it has just been poorly explained. On the one hand, our triune God created us and even today creates in us a new and clean heart. On the second hand, in Jesus, our triune God came down to earth to show us how to love. And on the third hand, the Spirit of our triune God, even today, encourages and inspires us. Not three Gods in one like "three in one oil." One all-encompassing triune God, whose presence fills our universe.

So after we reflect, and through reflection recognize our enslavement to nature and nurture, how do we tap into our triune God? Today, Paul and Silas show us how. We tap into God by sending taproots into God's healing waters. The taproots of prayer and songs to God.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and the people say, ... (Amen).