

***The Adventures of Paul: Imprisonment
Finding Freedom
Acts 16:19-40
11 July 2021
Sermon preached by Rev. Jessica McCrae***

The loaded minivan pulled into the only remaining campsite. Four children leaped from the vehicle and began feverishly unloading gear and setting up the tent. The boys rushed to gather firewood, while the girls and their mother set up the camp stove and cooking utensils.

A nearby camper marvelled to the youngsters' father, "That, sir, is some display of teamwork."

The father replied, "We have a system. No one goes to the bathroom until the camp is set up."

Seems a little cruel to me, but I suppose it does show what can be accomplished when everyone is working together for a common purpose, which is where we meet Paul and his friend Silas this morning. Since we left him, Paul has changed his name from Saul to Paul and is now travelling around with his friends preaching the good news of God's love in Jesus to much of the known world. They are in a place called Phillippi, in eastern Macedonia near Greece. The work they do here in Phillippi leads to the eventual establishment of a faith community and Paul's subsequent Letter to the Phillippians found in our New

Testament. Before that happens though, on this first visit to the city, Paul and Silas find themselves in quite a predicament. As we heard in the reading Paul frees a slave girl from the bondage of mental illness, which you would think would be met with welcome relief from all around this young woman.

But it doesn't quite work out that way. While the girl is freed from her mental illness, she is by no means a free woman in the traditional sense. She is a slave, not a person, but a piece of property in the eyes of this ancient society. Paul and Silas have trespassed on property not their own and when the owners saw that their ability to make money off this poor girl's tattered mind was gone, they promptly dragged Paul and Silas to the marketplace to be judged. I'm sure the locals, none too pleased that these intruders might disrupt their own businesses too, were more than happy to help out.

Here is a girl chained her whole life to the hell of mental illness and now she is free – there should be rejoicing. But her owners and the onlookers aren't free enough themselves to do that. They can only see their own interests. Religion has somehow become mixed up with economics and the owners do what everyone seems to do when their interests are threatened – they fight.

The girl's owners say to the judge, "We have no issue with a new religion of course, but these men, these Jews are disrupting our city. They are trying to change our Roman customs and it is going to have damaging repercussions for us. We need to put an end to it now and preserve our customs." They don't come right out and say that their financial self interest is threatened – instead they say that their nation, their ethnic identity is threatened. These people are foreigners they say, and must be stopped.

Well, it seemed to work and the democracy of the day, the crowd, takes over. They rally behind the business leaders of the city and they attack Paul and Silas, beat them and strip them and throw them in jail. The liberators have become the imprisoned. Jesus has helped set a tortured young woman free and in the process two of Jesus' people get jailed in the process.

But they don't languish there. In a move I'm pretty sure inspired Johnny Cash, Paul and Silas began to sing right there in that jail, and soon all the prisoners joined with them, shackled, imprisoned, singing and praying. At this point things get hectic. We are told there is an earthquake, the prison shakes and the doors fly open and all of the chains fall of the prisoners. When the jailer wakes and sees the doors open, knowing he will be to blame he prepares to take his own life until

Paul shouts, “Don’t do it. We’re all still here, just singing.” This leads to a discussion in which Paul explains to the jailer that *he*, metaphorically, has been the one chained and that now he too has a chance to find his freedom; which he gladly takes, becoming baptized and joining this new community of hope and new life together with the rest of his family.

So, what then is the point of this story? Apart from being a great adventure story, and it is that, why is it included in our scripture, and what does it mean for us today? There is of course the message of courage – Paul and Silas had a lot of that. There is the message of God being with us in the midst of our desperate challenges. But even more than that I think this story poses the question of freedom. What does it mean to be free? And where is true freedom found?

Every character in this story dances with freedom in a unique way and much like the parables of Jesus, everything we think we know about what it means to be free is turned upside down when we delve deeper into the story. Think about it for a moment. Who at first appears to be the free people in this story? It couldn’t be the slave, right? Or the men in prison. It must therefore be the business leaders, and the magistrates and the prison guard. That is who we would think of being free – those in control, those in charge. Right? Maybe not.

As it turns out all of them are actually shackled by some unseen thing – the business leaders and slave owners are imprisoned by their quest for money at the expense of others. The magistrates are held down by their perceptions of what is most important in their society – the comfort of the business people, the status quo, the way things have always been. And the prison guard. Well he is perhaps the saddest of them all, shackled by fear of failure, fear of not doing his job perfectly, fear of all those in greater authority over him. So imprisoned is he that he would rather see clear to end his own life rather than live with the wrath that may come because the ball was dropped on his shift.

Who then are the free? The poor young woman whose mind was cleared of her mental illness; she may have still been a slave, but for first time in a long time she knew who she was and regained some level of control in her life, and found some hope. And then we have Paul and Silas and the other imprisoned men. Sure they were still in jail, so freedom is a relative term, but they were free in their minds. The moment they chose to sing and to pray they reclaimed a part of themselves that was essential to their survival and to their humanity. In those simple actions they were refusing to give up, they were refusing to be the

miserable prisoners that someone else decided they should be. They refused to be hopeless. And ultimately we learn, where there is hope there is freedom.

The earthquake and the chains falling off are a powerful metaphor for what occurred in their minds and their spirits. I believe that once the Spirit moved them to sing and pray they were saved, they were freed from the mental imprisonment that jail could bring. They salvaged their humanity and more importantly, they were refocused on a cause, on their common purpose in Jesus Christ. Seeing what this did for their spirits, for their souls for their sense of well being, and wanting to be a part of this, the others joined them.

WE find ourselves in challenging times today. There is of course the pandemic, but there is also the truth of the residential school system in Canada, the oppression that has been placed upon so many in order to build our country, the oppression that remains for so many through racism, misogyny and disrespect. This scripture story reminds us that while the circumstances around us may be overwhelming, the way we live in them is a choice. Hope, that greatest gift that we know that comes to life for us in Jesus Christ, is the thing that will give us that freedom to continue working for a just and equitable world for all, that will enable us to stay true to our calling and our vision for the world, even in the

midst of pandemic. Even in the midst of that which overwhelms. Hope that one day things can be different, hope that one day there will be justice for all, and hope that we will experience our own transforming new life, just when it is needed most. Hope that we are not alone.

When we have that hope, we have that freedom within us that no oppression, not outside situation can touch. With that freedom we can find the courage to speak out and demand justice. We can find the courage to stand up for others who have lost their voice, like the weakened, emotionally challenged girl that Paul healed at the start of the story. Like so many in our society today. When we have that freedom, we can find the courage to bring hope to those like the other prisoners jailed with Paul and Silas, those who may have lost hope that things can be better, who may feel horribly alone. Things can be different. Let us be open to the hope we find in Jesus Christ. And may that hope set us free.

Amen.