

Stick to you conviction and see what arises!

Acts 16: 16-34 Paul and Silas in Prison

A woman possessed and a potential prison break, these are scenes worthy of the Oscars and I am grateful to Marilee for bringing that story dramatically to life. However today we are going to take a pause in our Oscar series; next week will be 'Three Billboards' so make sure you try and see that before next week. Today, however, we will use our imaginations to create our own story that demonstrates our commitment to stand up in faith. Our hope is that we will be inspired. Inspired to dedicate our lives as the jail guard did who asked Paul and Silas, "what must I do to be saved?"

The scriptures today challenge us to not succumb to a spirit of scarcity or greed and instead live a faithful life of abundance. We saw this in the first part of the scripture where the girl who was following them and saying they were slaves of the Lord. This woman, who had the spirit of divination and was getting all this money for their owners, and once Paul cast out this spirit, you can understand why the owners would be so upset when the spirit was cast out and she no longer had this power, (they weren't making the money they had expected.)

Back in October the Stewardship Committee shared with us their stewardship theme for the year which was, 'Rise Up, Rise Up; Get in the Habit'. The question you might be asking yourself is this; what are we being asked to get in the habit of? Or in the words of the jail guard, what must I do to be saved, what do I need saving from? We want to get in the habit of living out our mission, answering God's call to the best of our ability and being stewards in our world. We want to be saved from that which has potential to destroy us. How will our faith in our commitment to being a Christian save us. How will it save us from our own particular bondage, oppression, addiction, emptiness or boredom? What does it mean for us to be a Christian? How will others know that we are Christian?

The prophet Isaiah prophesized the call from God to servanthood, and these words were echoed in Jesus' teachings to the disciples and all the followers of Jesus. Isaiah proclaimed in Chapter 61 the following: He said: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because God has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the

day of vengeance of our Lord, to comfort all who mourn.” Jesus proclaimed then the Great Commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Jesus demonstrated to the disciples at the last supper that we are called to serve one another when he got down on his knees and he washed the feet of the disciples. He was not a slave, he was a servant. Paul obviously was upset because people were claiming that he was a slave to God, but he believed that God gave him free will. He had chosen to follow God and to proclaim the Good News because he was called to be a servant. He made the choice to serve God -- to pledge himself to God. Jesus demonstrated this through the washing of feet. He then taught us how we are to rely on one another. The people that followed Jesus relied on the hospitality of the people in the village that he was in. If people invited him in and provided him with shelter and food it was wonderful. If they didn't he would go to the next house until somebody did. Jesus also taught us that we need to trust that there will always be enough. If we share all that we are and all that we have, everyone will be provided for. Paul and Silas were living out these teachings, sharing the good news of Jesus with all the people they met on their travels. This was the beginning of what we now know to be Christianity.

David Forney, a theologian writes:

“In the healing of a slave girl and in the salvation of a jailer we witness how God brings about healing, wholeness and unity in two particular lives, witnessing what it means to move toward becoming completely one.”¹

One with God, one with each other, one in the Spirit. Now last week we heard the story of Saul's conversion after Saul had encountered Jesus, he was blind for three days and then regained his sight and it was after that experience that Saul became Paul and dedicated his life to Christ and Christ's teachings he went from somebody who persecuted Jesus to somebody who honored Jesus by living a life of faith. Now today we hear another story of a jailer who has this profound experience that inspired him to change his life and to promise and dedicate it to Christ as well. Paul and Silas, you might remember that they came into this village; they were preaching the Good News and what happened to them? They were punished, they were flogged, and they were thrown in jail. This echoes what happened to Jesus before he died and was resurrected. In that moment when Paul and Silas were in the jail, they had nothing else to do, but to pray and to worship God and as they did others in the jail listened and it was at that moment when the earthquake came and suddenly they were all free. Now I don't know about you, but in today's world I think they would have run. I don't think they would have just sat there listening to these two guys in an inner cell in shackles singing and praising God. However, something about what happened in that moment caused them not to leave and the jailer, when he realized what had happened believed that he was going to be punished because he had not done his duty in keeping the people in jail only to find out that not one of them had left. This was miraculous, it was weird

¹ Written by David Forney, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 522.

and in that moment instead of killing himself like he was planning to do when Paul told him to stop he fell to his knees in front of Paul and asked the question, “Sirs what must I do to be saved?” Why did the jailer feel compelled in that moment to dedicate his life to Christ? Why after that did he become baptized and become a follower and an apostle? In both stories, first the story of Saul’s conversion and then today’s story of Paul and Silas in the jail we see the Spirit at work. We hear again the words that all that is required of us to be saved to be a follower is to believe. Our baptismal promises, our pledges and our commitments to live out what we believe is how we are saved and how we answer God’s call of stewardship.

Here at Robertson-Wesley we believe that every single person here is a steward and that is demonstrated in so many ways and it is different for each person. Some live out their calling through giving money for offering, some volunteer their time in and around the church. For some it is how we treat each other day to day and for others it is in what we value and through the sharing of our faith stories with others that we live out our call to be a steward. Stewardship is a way to follow, a way to give and a way of life. We believe that we are a community that is spirited and the spirit is upon each and every one of us and that spirit has the power to awaken us both physically and spiritually to God’s call. The spirit that is upon us opens us up to the teachings of Jesus. That spirit stirs in us the desire to share our abundance and work for justice in the world. The Spirit of God causes us to rise up and commit to working together as the body of Christ in the world knowing that each one of us is one part of that body and when it works together we can change things; things will be transformed. It’s only when we do this together and combine all of our gifts that we are free from our bondage and will be able to live life in abundance. So the question is why pledge, why commit, why promise, why become a Christian?

When we pledge we are supported and we are supportive. I don’t know about you, but when you are trying to make a change in your life the only way you are successful is if you are accountable to someone else. Some of us need sponsors when it comes to exercise. I have never been as fit as I was long ago when my brother and I would go to the gym every single morning because I knew that he was expecting me to be there. Our faith is no different. When we look around and our friend isn’t sitting next to us in the pew we wonder, where are they? It is in that sense of support that we help stay on track. The jailer wanted to change his life because what he saw, witnessed, in front of him, but he needed help. He couldn’t do it on his own. We pledge because it is also a sign to others; how we live our life. How we proclaim and share our promises can inspire others can teach others about what we are called to do and how we are called to live our lives in the world. Pledging is a way for us to know that we belong. When we make a commitment to a faith community we know that we are a part of something that is bigger than ourselves. Think about why you came here in the first place, what draws you back each week? Sometimes it’s because we know we can’t live this life alone that we need others to support us, we need others to encourage us; we need others to affirm that we are on the right track. We do this by pledging and committing to one another and most importantly as Christians to God and to Jesus. Our call is clear and I hope that the Stewardship Committee has inspired you to stand as you did earlier and

exclaim that you are a part of this spirit and this movement that will change and transform the world. So let's do that together.

Amen.