

October 8, 2017 – Journey (Returning Citizens Sunday)

Theme: Tolerance

TEXT: Acts 16:16–34, The Darkness of Midnight

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

After many days of being followed by a slave girl, a young woman with a spirit of divination who continually cried out “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation,” Paul’s patience, and tolerance had waned. Becoming annoyed, Paul ordered the spirit which consumed the girl, to come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. The spirit fled, setting the girl free from mental infirmity and yet she still was not free—she was a slave, a possession, a piece of property and her owners were not happy with this turn of events, as they would no longer financially benefit from their exploitation of this young woman. They were angry.

Where is the celebration, the jubilation, the thankfulness that this young woman who had been imprisoned, possessed and oppressed her entire life was now free? Quite the contrary, her owners were angry that their unjust and oppressive scheme had been thwarted, taking Paul and Silas into custody, they drove them into the market place, and brought them before the magistrate. The charges leveled against them: they were Jews, disturbing the city and were advocating customs that are unlawful for Romans.

Paul and Silas’ experience is reminiscent of Jesus’ experience when he freed the man with the unclean spirit in Gerasene of his possession. There was no celebration that the man who had lived among the tombs screaming and hitting himself with rocks was now free from his affliction, free to live among others healed, whole and in his right mind. Instead the townspeople drove Jesus out of town, angry about the loss of their pigs.

Unfortunately, too many people have the same experience today. Every day young women and men are exploited mentally, physically, and emotionally by people who have promised to love and care for them, but instead have lured them to stand on street corners to sell their bodies, sling drugs or turned them on to drugs that have taken control of their lives; stealing their childhoods, their personhood and their future.

The accusations alleged against Paul and Silas: Jews, disturbing the city, and advocating unlawful customs are not too far from the accusations alleged against people today who march against discrimination, bigotry and hatred; or people who are described by the President and those on the far right as being the other, not part of their heritage, not honoring their country’s history; unworthy of healthcare, a decent home, food, water, or shelter when they have suffered the ravages of record breaking hurricanes, because they are considered different, not American enough, or dare to take a knee in quiet protest. All the while it’s okay to march in the streets carrying torches and shouting the “Jews shall not replace us.” My Lord, my Lord, we have not come too terribly far from Paul and Silas being accused of being Jews, trouble makers, agents of sedition.

Victimized by their accusers, the crowd, the police, the court system, tried and sentenced on the spot, Paul and Silas are taken into custody. Stripped of their clothing, severely fogged; beaten they are thrown into the innermost area of the jail, with their legs put into stocks and a jailer set outside their cell to ensure they don't escape.

While in seminary, I spent nine months in, and yes, I meant to say "in" and not at, the Allegheny County Jail, the location of my field study. At least once a week, I would enter the main entrance of the jail, show the attendants my identification, sign in, walk through a metal detector, and then I was buzzed in and an impenetrable, heavy steel door would close behind me with a loud clang. I would enter the world of over 2000 incarcerated men and women, guards, administrators, clerks, cooks and maintenance persons who day after day, year after year were locked behind bars, steel doors, housed on pods with others who society has deemed as criminals, irredeemable, sub-human. In that space, I met people who couldn't afford an attorney to prove their innocence and so they were languishing in jail putting their hope in an overworked public defender. I met people whose family members had abandoned them, tired, worn and financially stressed from the experience. I met people who willingly shared their crimes with me, some of which were heinous, but who nonetheless loved the Lord and just needed someone to treat them as human. I met people in the ACJ who had great faith that in spite of their plight or crime, God still loved them, God had forgiven them, even if they were guilty. Many had great hope that one day they would be free if not physically, then spiritually; they had great hope that one day they would reconcile with their family and those they had harmed, even if the person they harmed the most was themselves.

I also met guards who had become hardened by their years of being locked behind bars 40 plus hours a week; some had lost their sense of humanity, compassion and care. But I also met many guards who tried their best to treat their charges with respect. It quickly became apparent to me that the people who worked in the jail were imprisoned too. I prayed that God would allow me to be a presence of hope, a light shining in the darkness, a kind word for someone who needed encouragement, be they prisoner or guard, administrator or cook, chaplain or maintenance person. My time there also changed me, I now understand that, in the words of Bryan Stevenson, "each of us is more than the worst thing we have done."

Paul and Silas didn't allow their current situation or circumstances dim their outlook, weaken their faith or define their future. Earlier in the day, setting out to worship, to pray, it was around midnight Paul and Silas' had the opportunity to worship and pray. In the innermost part of the jail, with their legs in stocks and more than likely their hands shackled, Paul and Silas began to sing praises and pray to God.

Around midnight, when life is darkest and we can't tell the night from day; when we are imprisoned by our decisions, circumstances, problems, weaknesses, or predispositions is when many of us as a last resort, take a knee pray and worship God. When we've reached the darkness of the midnight hour, God is the only one to whom we can turn who is able to set us free.

Commentator, Willie James Jenkins states: “Praying and singing are acts of joining that weaves our voices and words with the desperate of this world who cry out to God day and night. Each time we gather in the name of Jesus and lift our voices, this point of reference should shape our reverence and drive us to see and learn and know and change the situations of those who suffer... Each time we pray and sing we are also joined to the shouts of joy and praise to God who saves and delivers and invites us to take hold of divine power by faith.” (Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Acts. pg. 164).

The Psalmist (30:4, 5) says it like this: “Sing praises to the Lord, O you God’s faithful ones, and give thanks to God’s holy name. For God’s anger is but for a moment; God’s favour is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

As the people of God, we sing songs of thanksgiving; we offer prayers of praise, comfort, provision and guidance; we march for the rights of the disposed, the despised and the dispossessed; we take a knee against injustice and systemic racism, bigotry, and police brutality. That’s why we travel to communities destroyed by natural disasters to help rebuild, rather than lob paper towels at people; that’s why we come together in town squares and on the steps of courthouses to lament and pray for those who have lost their lives or been harmed by gun violence or police who have sworn to protect and serve; by addiction, abuse, or any other action that disparages our humanity.

Paul and Silas raised their voices in songs of praise unto God, while the other prisoners listened and the jailer slept, and around midnight, God caused the earth to quake, shaking the very foundation of jail, breaking the chains that held them bound and opened the prison doors. But rather than escape, all those held captive stayed, because there was still work to do—Paul and Silas had to offer the jailer the opportunity to be set free from his imprisonment. The jailer sits in darkness and fear, and Paul’s words, “Do not kill yourself, we are still here;” frees him from darkness and brings him into the light; frees him from death to life and frees him from his imprisonment when he asks the question: “What must I do to be saved?”

To which Paul responds: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And scripture tells us: “They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. The jailer brought Paul and Silas up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.”

Brothers and sisters, another household has become a place where God rules and reigns. The Holy Spirit’s action against the injustice of that which imprisons and oppresses has set captives free, and at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord and the Light has overtaken the darkness of midnight. Amen.