

**May 29, 2022 | Sanctuary Worship Service**

**TEXT: [Acts 16:16–34](#)**

**TITLE: Tough Choices Made Easy**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

What motivates you? What wakes you up in the morning? What helps you set priorities on your Outlook calendar? What guides your decisions, your purchases, your attitudes?

It's no secret that researchers in many industries are trying to get to better understand the dynamics of human motivation. What gets us moving in a certain direction—whether on a diet plan, professional track or purchase history?

An article in the Harvard Business Review makes an interesting suggestion. The author asserts that “People tend to think of themselves as stories.”<sup>1</sup> If we can figure out what story people are trying to tell about themselves and enhance their story, we can get to the heart of their motivation.

For example:

He tells a story of some attorneys approached by the AARP, who asked if they would serve retirees in need for \$30/hour. Their answer was no. He goes on to say:

Then AARP had a counterintuitive brainstorm: they asked the lawyers if they would do it for free. The answer was overwhelmingly yes.

Why, you might ask? He argues that it is because people think of themselves as stories. He says:

...when we consider whether to do something, we subconsciously ask ourselves a simple question: “Am I the kind of person who...?” And money changes the question. When the lawyers were offered \$30 an hour their question was “Am I the kind of person who works for \$30 an hour?” The answer was clearly no. But when they were asked to do it as a favor? Their new question was “Am I the kind of person who helps people in need?” And then their answer was yes.

Our Biblical text serves us a story with rich characters and competing needs, but what are they trying to say about themselves? In many ways this text is a case study in motivation. Individuals are moved to action by a wide range of forces—some within and some outside of their control:

- A girl is motivated by a spirit that possesses her
- Her “owners” are motivated by money
- Paul is motivated by annoyance

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<sup>1</sup> [A Story About Motivation \(hbr.org\)](#)

- The crowd is motivated by fear-mongering hate-speech and inaccurate assumptions
- The prison doors and chains were motivated by an earthquake
- The jailer was motivated by fear
- The jailer motivated by gratitude and relief
- The jailer and his family were motivated by the Word of God

This story reads like a game of dominoes. One person's motivation evokes an action, which bumps into the next person's motivation and action and so on and so on until the way things were are no more. By the end of the story everyone is changed:

- A girl is exorcized from a spirit and liberated from slavery, her owners no longer able to exploit her
- Paul is incarcerated and then released, just like all of the prisoners whose chains were broken when the earth shook under their feet.
- And a jailer's life is transformed: he is freed from his fears and embraces God's word. He heals those he has harmed. He is baptized by the hands whose wounds he washed.

Within the story of our text, everything is changed. Identities, hearts, livelihoods...No one is the same.

This story affirms something we've noticed and pondered before: We're all connected. The aspirations and desires, hopes and failures, sins and acts of service all shape the human condition. We impact one another. Our gas prices go up when a war is waged a half a world away. We get sick when a virus spreads from person to person across the world. We experience summer and winter in the same week because of how human production of greenhouse gases has impacted the temperature of our planet.

We can see how individual after individual are impacted by the motivations and actions of another. We can connect dots. Sometimes the lines we draw are direct and clear and sometimes they spiral around one another, but we cannot escape the fact that we send ripples, some of which can be felt for generations.

*People tend to think of themselves as stories.*

About 10 days ago I received an email from my kid's preschool. The director let all of the parents know that the Department of Human Services required all students to participate in an annual emergency lockdown drill, which would be practiced the following week. The director gently assured us that they would remind the students that there was nothing to be afraid of during the drill. So, on Monday morning my child huddled in a bathroom with friends and teachers and practiced being perfectly still and perfectly quiet.

Less than 24 hours later I, like other parents—and non-parents alike—was horrified, sickened, and terrified when I heard the news that broke from Uvalde, Texas. I'm not going to retell that story because there may be some younger ears in worship right now who don't need to know those details, and because the older ears in the congregation are quite aware of what happened. But unknown motivation led to actions that changed people's lives forever.

And we know that those events did not occur in a vacuum. We can connect the dots to over two hundred stories like it that have occurred since 1990. We can connect the dots in yet another public health epidemic that has afflicted our society more than any other—a crisis created by the coalescing motivating forces of money, power, fear, toxic masculinity, underfunded systems that support the physical, mental, and emotional health of those most vulnerable.

Now I don't know what an 18 year old assailant thought about himself that day. But I think it is safe to assume that teachers did not think of themselves as heroes and children did not think of themselves as victims and anyone in that classroom saw themselves as martyrs victimized by a society that prioritizes access to weaponry over the welfare of all.

*People tend to think of themselves as stories.*

What is our story? As individuals, as a nation? Are we people who...what?

I know that our nation has said that we are "land of the free and home of the brave." My prayers this week have been that this shared identity starts to tell a larger story of a nation that works to ensure that children are free to learn without fear of harm; that those with troubles in body, mind or spirit are able to freely access the resources they need for their health. I want our story to tell of a bravery that motivates grown ups—not just parents and teachers, but law enforcement, legislators and strangers who go to the polls—to be brave enough to ensure the health, safety, and wholeness of all. I want freedom to mean free from oppression and I want bravery to dismantle hate. I want freedom to mean free from hunger and bravery to ensure that all are fed. I want freedom to mean free from fear, and bravery to be measured in the strength of one's love.

*People tend to think of themselves as stories.*

As a people of faith, we ARE a people of a story. And if we go back to our text for today, the sacred word shows us not only the motivation of human hearts and actions but the motivation of God.

Because, see, while humanity is busy doing what people do—getting annoyed, trying to make money, crying out for help, trying to do their duty... *God* is on the move. In the midst of imperfect human motivations that manipulate and exploit human interaction, *God* is on the move setting people free:

The enslaved, the irritated, the duty-bound, the prisoner unjustly accused and convicted alike. The young, unnamed, girl child; the Roman, Jewish evangelist miracle worker. They are ALL set free.

In spite of and through human action and interaction, God brings justice, liberation, and new life to God's people.

God's Spirit writes and re-writes the story of human agency, calling us and all of humanity into a new way of being—a life in which no child is harmed by the greed of adults; a life in which prison doors are flung open both the criminal and the righteous choose to do the right thing; a life where one's sense of identity and duty shift from that which brings death to that which brings life.

This story—OUR story—gives me hope. In a season of grief, despair, confusion and fear, we worship a God who is on the move, stirring human hearts, healing human wounds and liberating us from the forces that bind us or cause harm.

*People tend to see themselves as stories*

So what does OUR story hold?

See, I know that God is faithful. I know that God is working, and that even when I feel like giving up God never tires. I know that God loves us, that God hears our cries, is with us in our suffering, and is continually working to make all things, and all of us new.

But while I can preach the hope that comes from this truth, the story of our faith is not a bedtime read meant to tuck us in at night. It's not meant to give us a false sense of comfort that allows us to rest in the understanding that God will fix everything broken while we sit back in an easy chair and be comforted by an inexhaustible God.

Rather the story of our faith is meant to motivate us, call us to action, engage us as dynamic characters caught up in God's agenda. Our faith invites us to take our place in the story, to participate in the story, to BE the cast of characters not only UPON whom God works, but THROUGH whom God's love is made visible. And this story continues not only through our thoughts or our prayers but through our faith made visible in action.

So what do you bring to the story?

Do you bring a willingness to cry out in truth even when you risk annoying someone popular? Do you bring the courage to not be exploited by the forces of power that try to force the narrative of our day? Do you bring a passion to praise God in the wee hours of the night? TO do the right thing even when you've been given an easy out? Do you bring a willingness to see things—and people differently? To put your hope and energy and sense of duty into doing the work of a LIVING GOD rather than being a pawn of an oppressive regime?

We do indeed stand at a crossroads. The world is asking us to claim our narrative. So how will we ask the question of our day? What will we say when we are asked: "Are we the kind of person who..." What will fill in the blank?

Will we be able to say that we are the kind of people who make the world safer for kids, who cares for the most vulnerable in our society, who rights wrongs and enacts justice and instills hope? Will we be able to say that we will work with God to dismantle oppression that holds people hostage at the systemic and the personal level? Will we be able to say that we are motivated by God's gracious love for us in Jesus Christ?

We worship a God whose Spirit moves with grace, alacrity, beauty and might, inviting us to participate in this holy dance of liberation, justice, wholeness, and love.

May we who hear God's call to discipleship answer yes the story of God's love made visible in our lives and through our lives. May we say YES to the invitation to be a part of this story of Good news. May we say YES to what is possible when God is the force that claims us, compels us and directs our every move.

May we be motivated by God's love, and love one another as God first loved us.

May it be so.