

“Open Doors”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 19, 2019

5th Sunday of Easter

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 16:16-40

(introduction)

Last Sunday, we looked at the text immediately before this story – Acts, chapter 16, verses six to fifteen – which read like a quick, one act play: Paul and the other disciples cross over into Philippi, search for people in worship, and come across some women in prayer by the river. As a result of this encounter Lydia and her household are baptized and the travelers are welcomed into her home.

In today’s text, the disciples are still in Philippi, but the story we encounter – both in the first reading and in what we hear now – is a drama with multiple scenes, characters and twists in plot. God’s power is on full display as the earth quakes, the prison doors open, and the shackles that hold the disciples inside fall away. But, as we see, they cannot be truly free until all are free.

(read text)

Picture for a moment how many doors we walk through each day. In the bedroom and bathroom, the front door and back door, the car, the garage. There are office doors, school doors, and church doors; elevator doors, revolving or automatic doors. Our lives are literally filled with going in and out of doors.

Today’s passage is about closed doors, opening doors, and walking through doors. Luke, its author, tells us of prison doors opened for everyone – as radical an idea then as it would be today. But before we can grasp what may be meant by freedom and release from captivity, we need to understand the full impact and devastation of what it means to be in bondage.

At the beginning of this story, there are three different types of captivity described. First, there is the girl’s enslavement to a spirit of divination – an ability to tell the future – which makes her a prime target of exploitation by her owners. Second, Paul and Silas are described by this slave girl as being slaves themselves to the Most High God. And third, as we will see, there is the jailor’s sense of duty – being a slave to his job – which leads him to almost take his life when it seems he has failed his assignment.¹

¹ David Forney from *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

For days, we are told, Paul and his companions are followed around by this particular girl who, as we discover, is doubly bound: she is a slave to her human masters while also captive to the spirit which possesses her. Paul – annoyed by the spirit, if not equally outraged at her being a slave – turns to her and says to the spirit: “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” He therefore frees her of her spirit possession, but the result seems to do nothing to free her from being a possession herself.

We might wish at this point that we could hear more about the girl; to know that – despite the fact that she was no longer a money-maker for her owners – she would be set free from all that enslaves her; but the story turns in a different direction. Her owners seize Paul and Silas and turn them over to the authorities for disturbing the peace. At the crowd’s urging, they are stripped and flogged and placed in stocks in the innermost part of the jail.

In defiance to and in spite of the locked doors holding them in, we next see Paul and Silas praying to God and singing until late in the evening; not songs of lament for their situation, but songs of praise for the privilege of being God’s servants in the face of injustice.² That is when the earthquake reverberates through the prison, causing chains to unfasten and doors to open.

This is good news to everyone present except for the jailor, the one entrusted to make sure that everyone stays where they are meant to be. You would think that Paul and Silas might have seen this as a sign to exit as soon as possible, but what they show us is that despite the appearance of an open door, not everyone has yet been set free. According to the law, the jailor was responsible for the prisoners, so when we woke and saw the doors open, he knew that his job and indeed his own life were at stake; the cost of maintaining law and order in the Roman military occupation was high for everyone involved. It seems that the jailor, himself enslaved, was equally in need of salvation.

And so, in an amazing display of compassion over self-interest, Paul shouts out: “do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” Paul clearly understood that if the open door for him meant a closed door for someone else – the jailor – then the door was closed for both of them; and that only by looking out for each other could new life really be possible.³

Whenever the jailor’s question – “what must I do to be saved?” – is asked, the obvious counter-question is “saved from what?” Sword in hand, the jailor was probably thinking about how to be saved from the wrath of the authorities. Thus, in

² Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

³ Angela Ying, “In the Spirit of Open Doors”

its simplest form, Paul's answer – "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ" – seems almost inadequate; as if what the jailor (and all of us) really needs a plan for escaping the world's realities. Instead, are told to trust that Jesus Christ is saving us, and for that, we need not save ourselves.

Paul stood for what he believed, and because he thought freedom was important, he was thrown into prison. But, Paul would not let his freedom from prison come at the expense of another human being's welfare. Opening doors for someone else means seeing the beauty, sacredness, and worth of others as much as we see the beauty, sacredness and worth of our own life. Paul's example is one of mutual love for God and his neighbor, even when his neighbor had been his captor.

Today, as we ordain and install leaders of this congregation who have been called and elected to service, we remember these twin objectives of serving both God and one another. We rely on our leaders to show us how – even in the midst of adversity or injustice – to live out our belief in the Lord Jesus Christ. We look to them to show us how to sing songs of praise and pray to God even when it seems like the doors before us are closed. We follow them as they think not in self-interested ways, but instead about how none of us are truly free unless all are free; how our freedom, faith and joy need not come at the expense of another's welfare.

Much like we saw with Lydia in last week's story, the guard who hears the good news of the gospel in response invites Paul and his companions to his home. Once again, hospitality is the mark of gratitude for salvation. In both cases, conversion is not a solitary experience, but is celebrated and shared by all who are members of the household.⁴

And yet, this story still holds another plot twist. The next morning, the magistrates of Philippi want to be done with this episode quickly. Perhaps, they realize that the mob mentality had gotten out hand the previous day; perhaps they hoped that a single night of prison would be sufficient to prevent any more troublemaking from Paul and Silas; that despite the earth-shaking events of the previous night, they are still in control of their little part of the world.

But they are in for another surprise, as Paul reveals to the police his Roman citizenship for the first time. The magistrates had been hoping that the injustice that they had caused and allowed to take place could be swept under the rug and forgotten, but with that one declaration by Paul, their power and sense of control are taken away.

⁴ Eric Barretto from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Whether the enslavement of a human being for profit, or the jailing of political dissidents for speaking out, or the paralyzing fear that a subordinate might be held accountable even for acts of God, captivity is never victimless. That is why freedom and salvation are so inter-related; because when the doors are opened, when the powers that would control us are put in check, then we can experience what God intends for us: a belief in Jesus Christ as Lord which sets us free to join with others in acknowledging our connectedness.

And so, whether you have been called at this time as a leader in this congregation, or to serve God in some other capacity, we do so in the context of community. When doors are closed to some of us, none of us are truly free. Therefore, we continue to work for the release of those who are in captivity – in physical, structural or spiritual bondage – so that, together, we might discover and live into our freedom in Christ. AMEN.