

May 16, 2010  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Text: Acts 16:16-34

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“I can do whatever I want now.” Those were some of the last words I remember hearing from Dean. He was a friend at school. He was 16 when he ran away from home. I had seen him chafing against the limits his parents had established for him at home for some time. But now, he said, he was free. It turned out to be a truly sad kind of freedom. He was free, in a way. He was free from doing what his parents wanted. But he was also free from having a roof over his head. He was free from any pressure to graduate from high school. He was free from regular meals and regular showers. But worse, even though he thought he was free, instead he was driven by all sorts of insecurities and fears and resentments. He was driven to do whatever the alcohol told him to do, driven to do whatever his friends dared him to do, whatever would prove that he was cool. We drifted away from each other. The last I heard he was in jail—clearly not doing whatever he wanted.

It’s sad, but this way of thinking, this false understanding of freedom—that freedom is doing whatever we want, having no limits—is all around us. I’ve heard it used as justification for exercising monumentally bad judgment: “I’m not going to let anyone else tell me what to do.” Advertisers use it to try to get us to buy their products. They tell us, “You should have whatever you want. You deserve it!” But they’re only trying to manipulate us with our anxieties and insecurities. The truth is: freedom is not a simple matter. It isn’t “doing whatever we want.” Do we ever pause to wonder where those “wants” come from? Or consider how best to use the freedom we have?

In our first reading this morning, the author of Acts tells a wonderful story about freedom—about the appearance of freedom, and the real thing. As the story unfolds, it invites us to wonder who is really free. Paul and Silas had come to Philippi to tell people about Jesus and grow a community where people could live in the freedom and joy of the risen Christ. (We heard last week about how they made their way to Macedonia, how they met a woman named Lydia, and how the church in Philippi began.) One day, Paul and Silas were on their way to the place of prayer when they were accosted by a slave girl—but not just any slave girl. This girl’s owners made lots of money off of her ability to tell the future. People believed she was possessed by something like the spirit of Delphi, or some kind of demon. She began following Paul and Silas around, day after day shouting “These men are slaves of the most high God! They announce to you a way of salvation!”

Now, there’s a bit of irony in the story. The girl was doubly a slave—she was owned, as a slave, by the men who were making a fortune off of her ability to tell fortunes; she was also possessed by some spirit, by some demonic power, which we might name mental illness today. And this doubly-enslaved young

woman was following Paul and Silas around telling people they were “slaves” of God. It’s ironic because it’s essentially true. In his letter to the Romans, Paul referred to himself as “slave of Jesus Christ,” meaning he was bound to Christ forever (a good thing, of course). But for some reason, Paul didn’t want any free “advertising” from her. And when he had had enough harassment from her, he commanded the spirit, in the name of Christ, to leave her. He healed her, restored her, set her free—at least from one part of her bondage.

The girl was still a slave, though, the property of her owners, who exploited her condition to fill their pockets. Essentially she was a victim of human trafficking. Her owners were livid about what Paul had done. Instead of being able to rejoice that the girl was made well, that her life was no longer dominated by some malignant spiritual power, they were angry that they wouldn’t be able to make money off of her any longer. So, what kind of bondage is at work there? They were in bondage to money—and for sure they didn’t want to be set free from *that* bondage! So they hauled Paul and Silas before the magistrates. They couldn’t be so honest as to say, “These men have taken away our ability to take advantage of this little girl’s sad situation.” Instead, they stirred up a little fear of people who are different, a little anti-Semitism, a little anxiety about anything unfamiliar—and they got a riot started. Then the magistrates—having had their chains yanked—had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in jail. Were the magistrates free? No, it was easy for Paul’s enemies to manipulate them.

Now since Paul and Silas were in prison, it might appear that they were the ones in bondage, the ones in need of freedom. But in this story, things aren’t always what they seem. In the middle of the night, Paul and Silas weren’t whimpering or crying. They were praying and singing to God. Their bodies may have been in jail, but their spirits were entirely free. And then an earthquake shook the building so hard that it sprung all of the doors open. But Paul and Silas didn’t see it as an opportunity to escape. It appears that they thought being in jail was a prime opportunity to tell people about Jesus, to tell people who really needed to know.

And it turned out one person who really needed to know was the jailer. One might think that, being the person with the keys, the jailer would be free. But no, when he woke up and saw the doors of the prison open, he despaired. He figured his life was done, because he had failed his duty; he could expect severe punishment. So he drew his sword to kill himself. Paul and Silas had to reassure him that they were still there. He shouldn’t harm himself. And the jailer becomes the first person in our story to ask the right question. “What must I do to be saved?” How can I be rescued from this mess I’m in? What must I do to have the kind of life, the kind of freedom, you have? How is that you’re not afraid, you’re not anxious or worried. What’s your secret?

The secret for Paul and Silas was that their lives were not their own. Because they belonged to God, they knew a kind of freedom that the world couldn’t

understand—still can't understand. It's not really about being able to do whatever we want, but about being rescued and delivered from every sort of bondage that would prevent us from being the person God created us to be—a person whose life is shaped by love. The freedom God gives means being free from every kind of pressure to be something else, so that we can live our own true life as children of God.

We live in a culture that values freedom, or at least gives it really good lip service. But this story invites us to think again about what it means to be truly free. By the time we've reached the end of the story, we've seen those who appeared to be free—the slave owners, the magistrates, even the jailer. But they weren't really free. We've seen those who appeared to be in bondage—Paul and Silas. They were in fact the freest characters in the story. And we were given a glimpse of how powerfully the work of Jesus is continuing, bringing freedom and life and peace and release from bondage—for the slave girl and for the jailer and his family.

I wonder where we might find ourselves in this story. Do we see ourselves in those who are in need of deliverance and freedom? Or do we see ourselves as people who are in the process of being dramatically set free? Or maybe we feel we are living now in the freedom God gives. It wouldn't surprise me if it were sometimes one, sometimes another, or even all three at once. Because the freedom Jesus gives to us—it isn't a simple thing. That's what makes Paul and Silas' response to the jailer a little tricky. They tell him to believe in Jesus. They invite him to be baptized. But the story understands that believing in Jesus and being baptized is just a beginning. It's the entry into life with God—day by day opening our hearts to God, entrusting our whole selves to God, to belong to God and have our lives made new and whole as we follow Jesus in his way of forgiveness and compassion and service. And through the years, as we live into this relationship, in the community of God's people, Jesus' words and Jesus' love do re-shape our sense of who we are—and make us free. As we live into the gift of God, as we put our lives under God's word and God's promise, as we put ourselves into God's hands, to belong to God, we do come to know the truth, God's truth that does make us free. Amen.