

Seventh Sunday of Easter, C  
Acts 16:16-34  
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21  
John 17:20-26

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Today's reading from Acts of the Apostles inspires us to reflect on slavery and freedom – what true freedom is, how God in Christ is bringing greater freedom to this earth, and how we can get on board.

Freedom is not the same as insisting “I can do whatever I want!” So many people say, *Don't mess with my individual rights, don't make me wear a mask, don't tell me I can't carry a gun wherever I want.* This self-centered version of freedom basically amounts to “*Don't tread on me.*” It's sometimes identified with a certain brand of Christianity – but it's a shrunken version of what God wants for the human family.

What God intends is nothing less than for all people to have the power to act, speak, think, and live out their God-given potential in the fullest way. For all people to be released from every kind of imprisonment, from whatever inhibits them and damages their life. To bring liberation from any power that would manipulate and exploit and demean and entrap them.

America calls itself the land of the free, but there is no country that has a corner on freedom. This Memorial Day weekend, cemeteries will be filled with American flags on the graves of fallen service members. We often say they gave their lives for freedom – to rid the world from oppression and free people from tyranny. And in our imperfect world, wars do sometimes need to be fought to preserve freedom. There's a war being fought right now in Ukraine, and its purpose to free the people from aggressors.

But even as we plant those American flags, we have to be careful not to identify freedom with any one nation or ideology. Because our own nation's practice of freedom has never lived up to the ideals we hold. African Americans remind us that the lofty words of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution were never originally intended to apply to Black people at all. Our founders did not consider slaves to be even fully people, much less citizens, in legal terms.

Every society has its own ways of deciding who gets to be free, and who will be denied freedom. So following Christ always calls us beyond any national or political identity. God calls us to freedom that breaks every kind of chain and opens every prison that subjugates people.

To get a feel for freedom, let's think together about the beautiful implications of these words:

Debt free – What does that mean? You are set free from financial burdens that were crushing you. No longer paralyzed by bills you could never hope to pay off. Released from something that took away your future.

Cancer free – What freedom do those words bring? For this time, your body is no longer invaded by cells that can kill you. You are free of something that threatened your life.

Drug free – It means your life no longer controlled by addiction that robs your money, your time, your health. You are free of something that entrapped and manipulated you.

Freedom from violence – It's something we can only dream about today. But we do dare dream. No more murders on Portland streets. No more supermarket shoppers and church worshippers and school children having their lives cut short. Every person free to move safely both in their home and in public. This freedom is God's dream too.

What else do people need to get free from today? (ask for responses verbally...) What are some of the things that enslave or imprison people today? *Houselessness, mental illness, poverty, crime, greed, despair and hopelessness* What would freedom look like?

In reflecting this way, we are drawing a picture of freedom together. This is the kind of liberation God wants for all creation.

And in case we might forget, there are some people today who are literally slaves and literally need to be liberated and set free in the most practical sense.

Modern-day slavery is also called human trafficking, and it's believed to entrap up to 45 million people worldwide. (See [www.endslaverynow.org](http://www.endslaverynow.org)) Modern-day slavery includes forced labor, child labor, forced marriages, and sex trafficking. It is built on lies and deceit, and it's all about money—abusing and exploiting vulnerable people to make a profit.

Our scripture passage from Acts explores slavery and freedom from many angles – and it's impossible to read this passage without noticing that it's essentially about human trafficking. The disturbing thing is, the scripture itself doesn't make very much of this.

In the town of Philippi, Paul and Silas met a young girl who was enslaved in two ways. First, she was possessed by an unwelcome spirit. Second, she was exploited by handlers who made big money off of her, claiming she could tell fortunes, charging the gullible public for this service. It's very likely the slave girl had some form of mental illness that

they exploited—until Paul performed an exorcism and cast out that controlling spirit, ruining their business.

Her traffickers became furious. They got Paul and Silas thrown in jail – and dramatic events followed. An earthquake broke the prison chains, terrifying the jailer who thought he would be punished. The jailer even drew a sword to kill himself. But in the end, he and his family became part of the Jesus movement through baptism.

In terms of the slave girl, though, it is a troubling story. Paul talked right past her, he showed no outrage at her being enslaved. He freed her from the evil spirit but not those abusive owners. What happened next to this young girl is never told, and we can't help but worry. She's just a small character in a larger story that rolls right on. But in another way, this young slave girl is the key to understanding what really enslaves all of us.

Because as soon as Paul starts messing with that system of exploitation, that greedy scheme that entraps and demeans this girl ... we start to see that there are much larger oppressive systems and sinister forces at work.

How do the traffickers get Paul and Silas locked up? Antisemitism, plain and simple. Lies and prejudice. They spread the story around town that “these Jews are not like us” – they are “a threat to our way of life.” Tapping into bigotry and knee-jerk hatred of the other, these traffickers quickly succeed in smearing the strangers. This kind of hatred is as old as the hills. It is still potent, and it is still killing people today.

This scripture exposes layers and layers of captivity and domination and injustice.

*The girl is enslaved by her owners. The owners are enslaved by their greed, which destroys their humanity. The authorities are enslaved by bigotry and hatred of outsiders. The jailer is enslaved by fear of the powers above him, ultimately enslaved by fear of the Roman empire that rules by brute force.*

This is the kind of bondage that enslaves our world. The role of Christ's people – our role -- is to unmask these layers of captivity and set people free.

In the midst of this unfolding story, there comes a certain odd, pivotal moment after the earthquake when Paul and Silas are sitting there in a prison cell with no chains binding them anymore. Suddenly they are free, but they do not leave the prison. And we have to ask-- *What's keeping them there? Why are they choosing to remain?*

What's happening is that Paul and Silas are bound, not by chains, but by conscience and duty to God. Remember how the slave girl called them “slaves of the Most High God”? It's true. They stay in that prison to accomplish God's purpose of liberation. To help the

jailer and his family understand there is more than oppression and domination in this world. God is working through the Lord Jesus Christ to set this whole world free.

There are so many lords and masters people are called to answer to in this story. The slave girl to her owners, the jailer to Rome. But Paul and Silas are very clear that the only master they serve is Jesus Christ.

They don't serve greed as their master. They don't serve bigotry or hatred as their master. They don't serve any human empire as their master. The only one they answer to is Jesus.

And the same is true of us. Though there are many forces vying for control over us, and always will be in this earthly life -- our allegiance is only to Christ. Christ didn't come to lord it over anyone, Christ didn't come to exploit or entrap or control or enslave -- Christ came instead to serve, to kneel and wash feet, to go to the cross when it became necessary, to serve and set people free through God's immense love.

Christ came not only to set us free from guilt and sin but actually to change the way all creation is ordered. There are many ways people are enslaved or imprisoned today -- we have named some of them together this morning. Yet Christ has come both to set spirits free and literally set bodies free too.

Being set free in Christ, we draw on God's wisdom, truth, and love to guide us in the midst of so many forces that strive to control us -- forces outside us and forces within us. Being set free in Christ, it becomes our passion to set everyone free, in whatever way we can.

I wonder how we may hear God's Spirit calling us to freedom today. And I wonder what may be one action, one step we can take, with God's help, to work freedom for ourselves and for others.

People of God, when Christ sets us free, we are free indeed. And we are called to practice freedom in the strength of God's infinite love.

Thanks be to God, Amen.