

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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Portland, Oregon
June 2, 2019

We may think of slavery as something that belongs in the history books, but unfortunately it is still happening today. Advocates say there are between 21 million and 45 million people trapped in modern-day slavery, which is also called human trafficking (www.endslaverynow.org) Modern-day slavery includes forced labor, child labor and forced marriages, as well as sex trafficking around the world. It is built on lies and deceit, and it's all about money—abusing and exploiting vulnerable people to make a profit.

Flor Molina became a victim of slavery in the garment industry in Los Angeles. When she was a single mother in Mexico, she started taking sewing classes to support her three children. Her sewing teacher told her about a good job in the US that would let her send money home to her family. But when she arrived in Los Angeles, she quickly realized it had all been a lie. The trafficker told Flor she now owed her almost \$3,000 for bringing her to the U.S. and would have to work for her to pay the money back. Flor was forced to work 18 hours a day making dresses. When all the workers got to go home, she had to clean the factory. She was forced to sleep in a storage room and share a single mattress with another trafficking victim. Fed only one meal a day, she was forbidden to talk to anyone or leave the factory. The owner said if she went to the police, her family back home would be harmed. This went on until one day she was finally let out to attend church and managed to make a phone call with the help of some strangers who spoke Spanish. Today she works as an advocate for women in similar situations.

<http://www.endslaverynow.org/learn/slavery-today>

Flor's story is not that different from others who've been enslaved as domestic workers in private homes, or immigrant women in the news very recently who are lured to the US from China and forced to work as prostitutes in massage parlors in Florida and other places. Business owners exploit these women, moving them from location to location, confiscating their passports, forcing them into sex work to pay off high debts. (*Behind Illicit Massage Parlors Lie a Vast Crime Network and Modern Indentured Servitude*, NY Times 3/2/19) Powerful men like New England Patriots' owner Robert Kraft are accused of taking advantage of these women's captivity. And prostitution is just one aspect of the vast sex industry that exploits women, men and children for profit, even here in Portland. (ELCA Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2015 www.elca.org) Using people as objects, manipulating them to make money, violates everything we believe about how sacred every child of God really is.

I have to admit these abuses were not fully on my radar until recently, but you can be sure the homeless women who come to Rose Haven Shelter know these dangers very well. My own privilege – my social class, my education, income level, even my race— have protected me from this kind of bondage and captivity. But compassion calls all of us to pay attention. And today our scripture also calls us to pay attention.

Our passage from Acts explores slavery and captivity from many angles – physical, economic and social, as well as spiritual. It's impossible to read this passage and not notice that it's essentially about human trafficking. And the disturbing thing is, the scripture itself doesn't make very much of this.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas meet young girl who is enslaved in two ways. First, she is possessed by what's called a "spirit of divination" which gives her the ability to predict the future. It's hard to know what this looked like in practical terms– was it voluntary or involuntary? Was it more like a special talent, or more like a form of mental illness? The Bible tells this story like an exorcism, so it looks like this was not a welcome spirit but rather a spirit that controlled and manipulated the slave girl.

And we know for sure that people were controlling this girl too. The slave owners were making big money by forcing her to tell fortunes. They were so financially invested that when Paul wrecked their income source by casting out the spirit, the slave owners made false accusations and got him thrown in jail. The story continues in dramatic fashion. An earthquake breaks the prison chains, terrifying the jailer because he thinks all his prisoners will escape, and he'll be punished for failing his duty. The jailer is so terrified he even draws a sword to kill himself. But in the end, he and his family become part of the Jesus movement through baptism.

In terms of the slave girl, it's a troubling story. Paul talks right past the girl. He shows no outrage at her being a slave. He sees her only as a nuisance. He frees her from the spirit but not from her abusive owners. What happens 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 profit-seeking that demeans her humanity ... we start to see that there are much larger oppressive systems and sinister forces at work.

How do the owners get Paul and Silas locked up? Anti-semitism, plain and simple. Prejudice and lies. They spread the story that "these Jews are not like us" – they are "a threat to our way of life." Tapping into bigotry and knee-jerk hatred of outsiders, these

traffickers quickly succeed in smearing the strangers, never of course mentioning their real reason for hating Paul.

And we start to see into the many layers of captivity that are enslaving people in this interconnected system of domination and injustice. Layers and layers of abuse and suffering and inhumanity.

The girl is enslaved by her owners. The owners are enslaved by their greed. 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.

The role of Christ's people 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. 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 – or even more truthfully, they are anchored by faith. Faith in God is what keeps them there, a place of suffering most people would run away from immediately. They are bound by obedience to God– by the conviction that God wants them to stay in that prison to accomplish something good. Remember how the slave girl called them “slaves of the Most High God”? It's true. They could leave the prison, but they do not. Instead they use this opportunity to help the jailer and his family understand that there is more than oppression and domination in this world. They help them see that God is working through the Lord Jesus Christ to set this whole world free.

That's a very interesting and important word – “Lord” – which also means “master.” It's used time and again in this passage. There are so many lords and masters people are called to answer to in this story. The slave girl to her owners (masters), the jailer to his superiors and to Rome (his ultimate master) 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 the Roman Empire as their master – though one thing Caesar required was that all Romans call him “Lord” and literally bow to him as “master.” Caesar saw his political power demanding spiritual allegiance too. This is how far the abuse of human power can go!

But no—for Paul and Silas, their only master—their only Lord – was Jesus.

And it's the same for you and me.

We may chafe at the thought. We're independent people. We aren't eager to be bound to anyone or any thing as our master. But being true to Christ is actually the only thing that can set us free.

Being set free is not just about being independent. Truly being set free means being set loose from the forces of oppression and evil – abuse, violence, greed, addiction, fear – every force that seeks to rule this world and rule us. Truly being set free means being delivered into God's love, and into a way of life that reflects freedom and peace and truth and trust, and is ruled wholly by compassion, forgiveness and love.

For you and me, there is enormous freedom in acknowledging only one master – Jesus Christ our Lord. We are free when we shape our lives around the one and only power that has the wisdom, truth, and love to guide us in the midst of so many forces would like to own us -- both forces inside us and outside us.

Belonging to Christ alone, we are not beholden to anything else. We are not beholden to our own ego or seeking the approval of others. Not beholden to success or appearances or money. Not beholden to our own desires or addictions or wants and whims. Not beholden to any of the many systems of oppression that abuse God's children.

Because we only answer to the Lord Jesus Christ. We build our lives on Christ's priorities and not our own. And Christ is a different kind of master than the world has ever seen. The master who acts like a servant. The master who kneels to wash feet. The master who teaches us to serve. And to value each person. And to question every prejudice. To love freely. To serve willingly. To care without reserve. To speak up for the abused. To work for true justice. In Christ's spirit.

Because the only kind of world we would want to live in, is the one our Lord Jesus is leading us into and strengthening us to live for, opening our eyes to see it dawning even now.

And we can be sure of God's help as we work to get ourselves free, and to set others free, in God's infinite love. Thanks be to God. Amen.