

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

SLAVE AND FREE

Sermon for Easter 7C-Acts 16:16-34, Rev 22:12-14

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You've seen license plates from the State of New Hampshire that say, "Live Free or Die"? Years ago there was a case of a man arrested for obliterating those words on his car's license tag. He claimed that they violated the tenets of his religion. I asked my father, who lived in New Hampshire for the last twenty years of his life, whether he saw anything objectionable about having the motto on his license plate. Characteristically he said, "No, I'd like to underline it."

We Americans are very proud of our freedom. We do have an array of guaranteed freedoms that are the envy of many in today's world. But even our freedom is not limitless. Our freedom typically extends to the point at which it impinges on that of our neighbor, and there it ends.

People of good will can disagree on what the appropriate limits of freedom are. I had a pointed disagreement with my second-grade teacher about the limits of my freedom in her classroom. I challenged her concept of freedom, and she challenged mine.

Today's lesson from the Book of Acts presents a rather challenging view of freedom on the one hand, and slavery and imprisonment on the other. The contrasts between the supposedly enslaved and the apparently free in this story are very interesting.

Paul and Silas, early Christian missionaries, have traveled to Philippi to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A slave girl attaches herself to them during their stay, basically stalking them while declaring loudly, "These men are slaves of the Most High God and preaching the way of salvation."

What are we to make of the girl's "spirit of divination?" From the fact that her handlers made money from this trait, we can infer that the girl was clairvoyant, and told accurate fortunes. People of the day would have attributed all kinds of uncanniness to the spirit world, so this girl was said to have a spirit. Or, more accurately, the spirit had her.

Poor girl. She is doubly enslaved: not only in thrall to her owners, she is also in thrall to a spirit. The other remarkable thing is that here is a slave identifying Paul and Silas, who are at this point walking around free, as slaves. We readers are compelled to ask, how are the apostles slaves and how are they free? Certainly they serve God, subjecting themselves utterly, body and soul, to the Gospel of Christ. But as the story progresses, look how they demonstrate how free they really are.

Pushed to his limit by the fact the girl won't leave them alone, Paul, in Jesus' name, expels the spirit that possesses her. In reaction, the girl's owners have Paul and Silas arrested, beaten and imprisoned. But here is an odd thing. Though imprisoned, Paul and Silas' spirits remain remarkably free.

Paul and Silas spend their night in the stocks praying and singing hymns. This reminds me of that inspiring story of anti-apartheid activists held in solitary confinement in South Africa, joining one by one in the song, "If you believe and I believe" until the

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prison walls rang with their song: "If you believe and I believe and we together pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God's people free." Even in chains, Paul and Silas are free in the love of Christ.

Then there is this miraculous earthquake, which really does set them free along with all the other prisoners. And we are introduced to another character whose freedom is ambiguous: the jailer.

Shown pictures of a jailer and some prisoners and asked which is free, we'd all say the jailer. But how free is a jailer who forfeits his life if the prisoners escape? His motivation to perform his job is based on fear. This poor man is not entirely free, is he? Paul and Silas were much freer in spirit even when they were in chains.

Paul assures the distraught jailer that no one has escaped. The man is so moved he converts on the spot, bringing along his entire household into the bargain. One wonders what kind of hell the jailer caught the next day from his superiors. However, the jailer is not at this point concerned. He has been freed from fear and moved to love. He is finally, truly free.

This story challenges traditional ideas of freedom. By juxtaposing the slave girl and the apostles and the jailer, the author of this story is suggesting that there are different kinds of freedom, and different kinds of imprisonment and slavery. The author is further asserting that true freedom lies only in serving Jesus.

The song goes, "I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free." And free we are, thank God, to a great extent, in a civil sense. This story from Acts challenges us to consider whether we are free in every sense. There are ways to be free, and there are ways to be enslaved.

What are some of the things to which people unconsciously indenture themselves? Addiction is an obvious answer. But there are other addictions besides alcohol and drugs. People can be in thrall to power, habits of spending or acquiring wealth, or the approval of others. Certain patterns of thought are also imprisoning.

The symptoms of these addictions may be as obvious as those of other addictions, like missing work or lying to friends and family. Or they may be more subtle. Have you ever experienced one of the following: chronic fear or unease; a feeling of being trapped by a job or a relationship; constant complaining without action to mitigate the object of one's complaint; being overly critical of others; feeling superior to others; persistent anger, or sorrow or shame? These, too, are indications of a kind of slavery.

Perhaps we are all slaves; it is a matter of what we are enslaved to. If we are slaves to anything but the Most High God, we are imprisoned indeed. But by being slaves to the most high God, we are free indeed.

Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. When we live and move and have our being in Christ, we live in thrall to no one, and no thing. We are free at last.