

Easter 7C / Ascension
Acts 16:16-34
Luke 24:44-53
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It was on my weekend in prison recently when I really began thinking about today's story from Acts, about the earthquake that busted Paul and Silas out of prison. At one point on that weekend, we sang "I'll Fly Away," and I was struck by the line, "Like a bird from prison bars has flown..." Yet as I worked on this text, I realized that it's not really a story about being a prisoner. It's also not a story of a Christian magic trick, where if you pray hard enough, or if Jesus likes you enough, immediate and spectacular things happen. This is a story about the effects of the power of the risen Christ, set loose in the world—power whose mark is felt in the lives of individual people and by whole communities, power that changes the world, all in microcosm in this one story. This is a story for this Easter season, for the day of Ascension, which we celebrate today, and one that prepares us for the power of Pentecost, which we'll celebrate next week.

In the passage from Acts, Paul and Silas are still in Philippi, where last week we read of the conversion of Lydia. She was already a believer in the God of Israel—though she was not a Jew—and became baptized upon hearing the teaching of Paul. This week ends with a very different conversion, one that happens in a place much less sympathetic to Paul and Silas—the marketplace economy and justice system under Roman rule. In the story, the two men were followed in the street by a young girl, a slave, who apparently had some sort of ability to tell fortunes or to read people or

situations. This kind of thing was pretty common at the time, but this girl must have been particularly good, as the text says that she made her owners lots of money doing it.

In this case, the slave girl hollers at Paul and Silas, calling them slaves of the Most High God, proclaiming a way of salvation. So she's actually telling the truth about who these men are and what they're doing, but the voice is one of a spirit that has possessed her and is not life-giving for her. In that sense, it's an evil spirit, even though it speaks the truth; you may remember stories in the gospels about demons recognizing who Jesus was, that he the Son of God. They say that even the devil can speak the truth. So Paul calls the spirit to come out of her, maybe out of compassion for her, or maybe just out of annoyance or not wanting attention drawn to him. But whatever his motivation, he sets into motion a remarkable chain of events.

Paul's big mistake, of course, was that he messed with the profit-making ability of the slave girl's owners. That's the cardinal sin, as true then as now, and we see the greed of the owners spring into action. They seize Paul and Silas and drag them to the marketplace, where the authorities, would pass judgment on their case, with the help of the crowd—doesn't that sound like a fair and efficient way of meting out justice? Yet look at what the slave girl's owners say once they get there: "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Instead of accusing Paul and Silas of robbing them of income by healing their slave, they accuse them of being Jews and advocating customs that are supposedly illegal for Romans. In effect, they played the race and culture

card; anti-Semitism among Romans was common, and the owners must have known that this supposed offense would be much more offensive to the crowd (Robert W. Wall, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. X*, p. 233). And indeed, the crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas, who were stripped and beaten and thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to put them in the innermost cell, farthest from the exit, and to chain them up by their feet—these two weren't going anywhere.

What put Paul and Silas in prison? It was their actions on behalf of a nobody, a slave girl. It was their meddling with the exploitative system that used the girl to make other people money. It was the anti-Jewish prejudice of the members of this Roman colony. It was their effort to bring the life-giving gospel of Christ to a place that wasn't looking for it and didn't want it, a place where the gospel was just going to shake up the status quo, and where the status quo wasn't going to take it lying down.

This week I have felt a strong connection between this story and an issue shaking up our status quo lately, one that may be uncomfortable for some—the issue of immigration. I want to say that I understand that there are legitimate concerns along the border, things the border states especially have to wrestle with and need help with. But the fact is that the current debate on how to address these concerns has become more and more polarized, more and more a haven for extremists with extreme solutions.

There are different examples of solutions that might be considered extreme, depending on your perspective, including the concrete wall on our own Texas-Mexico border, and now two new laws in Arizona. One requires people to carry papers proving

their immigration status and requires law enforcement to stop people who look suspicious of being undocumented. The second prohibits the teaching of ethnically-based curriculum that encourages children to feel solidarity with a particular ethnic group.

Just to be clear—I've said it before, but my job is not to stand here and tell you how our nation's policies on immigration should read. But it is my job to tell you that when we are making policy decisions as citizens of this country who are also Christian—Christianity, in fact, being our primary identity—we have to use a standard and a perspective that is broader than just what would immediately and visibly benefit us. We have to be honest about our system, which on one hand welcomes cheap labor and all the resulting financial benefits to the consumer, yet which on the other hand resents having to regard those cheap laborers as human beings, as people whom God loves and orders us to love. Leviticus 19:33-34.

To take that perspective on the issue of immigration may not lead us directly to what our national policy should look like. But it will make clear that certain responses are off limits, out of bounds, inappropriate for Christ's people. I can tell you that the bishops of The United Methodist Church have spoken on this issue more than once. "In May 2009, the Council of Bishops called on President Barack Obama to back measures to help immigrants obtain citizenship, reunite immigrant families, increase the number of visas for short-term workers, and extend legal protections to documented and undocumented workers. Last fall, the bishops appealed to church members 'to become

acquainted with the plight of immigrant families living in the U.S. and to join the effort to reform U.S. immigration laws and practices” (5/6/10, www.umc.org).

We probably won't all agree on what the outcome should be. But the bishops have called us to something very important as a starting point—to form relationship with “those people,” to learn what their lives are like and how we are connected by a social and economic system that is bigger than any of us. Our citizenship in this world has to be marked and shaped by our citizenship in the kingdom of God, the family and household of Christ. That's true, no matter what kind of mess it gets us into.

Such certainly was the case with Paul and Silas; they really riled everybody up, following the call Christ had laid upon them, and it landed them in a rough place. Their response was to wait and pray and sing (maybe they too sang “I'll Fly Away,” like we did at Lockhart). And then suddenly at midnight, the earthquake hits, and the place shakes down to its foundation, the doors fly open, the chains fall off...and nobody does anything. Except the jailer, who moved immediately to take his own life—because he must have figured, either his boss would kill him for letting Paul and Silas get away, or the earthquake was some god's vengeance for his locking them up in the first place. Paul calls to him to stay his hand—maybe led by the Spirit, since Paul couldn't have seen what the jailer was doing—and finally the jailer throws himself at the feet of Paul and Silas, asking what he needed to do to be saved.

Some of us may wonder or debate what it means to be “saved;” some of us have felt abused or put off by that term. But let's take it today to mean all this transformation, which could only have happened at God's hand, which never would

have happened otherwise. The apostles answered the jailer, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.’ They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house.” On top of all the drama in the community, on top of the slave girl healed, we witness another conversion to Christ, another life changed, another household transformed, and another response of hospitality in gratitude—the jailer took Paul and Silas home and bathed their wounds and set a meal before them, and all in the house rejoiced with the new believer. To be saved is to experience the power of the love of Christ, which can transform not only the human heart, but the whole world.

The power of Christ is the love of Christ, and the message we hear on this Ascension Sunday is that we’re it; it’s been entrusted to us. Though we cannot control or contain this power or this love, we can be agents of it. Jesus has flown like a bird from prison bars, and he’s left us behind, to sing and pray and wait for him, to love boldly in the meantime, knit together as his body, speaking the challenging word that needs speaking to an exploitative world, suffering on behalf of others in order to show them and invite them into that love, putting flesh on the love of Christ, even as he put flesh on the divine love of God. May God grant us courage and joy as we seek to live in this powerful way.