

Slave or Free?
Acts 16:16-34 John 17:20-26

I have long thought that it has become more and more difficult to interest people IN and nurture people to GROW in their Christian faith than perhaps ever before. As a matter of fact, in some ways, I believe that today represents the most difficult time in history to bring the Christian message to those who have not heard, those who are apathetic, those who are against, and those who are simply too busy.

Now, please don't get me wrong. It has rarely been easy, bringing the message of a crucified Christ to a world more interested in eating than in eternity. But there are some special challenges now that the Church has never faced before that makes a difficult job even harder.

I am firmly convinced that the biggest barrier to individuals growing in the Christian faith today is, well, "Christians". You see, I think "we" are our own worst enemy. Seriously...I look around at what I see being done in the name of the Christian faith, being offered up as examples of the Christian faith, and I can't help but wonder why anyone would want to be involved with this thing called "Christian".

I see so-called Christians more interested in condemning others who do not follow their agenda than in preaching the Gospel of Love. I see the son of a world-famous evangelist using his father's empire as pulpit for a weaponized form of the faith that is more about destruction than inclusion.

I see American states passing laws banning abortion in any form, even if the pregnancy was the result of rape or incest, even if the pregnancy risks the life of the mother, even to the point where a woman who miscarries will have to provide documentation to prove that there was no abortion or face time in prison. This is being done in the name of Christianity...these same fine folks who want to take away the rights of people who do not identify as strictly male or strictly female, or who have the audacity to be gay, lesbian or simply "different". All in the name of the Christian faith.

These same people who want to divide families who have the misfortune of being refugees, who want to take away support from those who happen to be the poorest in the land and who are completely convinced that they are “superior”...all in the name of the Christian faith.

If I looked on from a distance, I would find it easy to see **the Christian faith** as those **people** who speak of love but act in hatred, proclaim welcome but work hard to keep people who are different out, read from a Gospel of inclusion, but live lives of exclusion...and wonder if **Gandhi** was right when he said, *“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ. If your Christians were like your Christ, all of India would be Christian.”*

But it doesn't have to be that way. And it hasn't always been that way.

In the seventh century, a young nobleman who took the name Columba sailed to a small island in the Hebrides and from there spread the Gospel of Christ to much of Scandinavia and Northern Europe. Compare his message to the message of Christians today: Columba said, “You are a wise and insightful people. You have much learning, much wisdom and much honor. If you wish, I can tell you the one thing you lack that will make all of your learning, wisdom and honor make sense. It is the story of a man...”

No condemnation, no belittling, no sense of superiority...only a gentle desire to share the message of Christ. In fact, telling about Christ by showing Christ.

But that's not new, is it?

In fact, as I think of it, the Christian message has always been more successful when preached from a position of weakness, rather than power. But that's not new, either, is it?

Let's consider our story from Luke's book about the new church, “The Acts of the Apostles” or simply “Acts”. Last week we found an interesting story of a woman named Lydia amidst the “big” stories of Acts. But today, we return to one of those “big” stories as we turn our attention to Paul and Silas.

Today's story is one that is all about freedom and imprisonment, freedom and slavery. There are multiple “slaves” in this story, although it is a point often overlooked.

The story begins with a slave girl. She may be free to follow Paul and Silas around, but the truth is she is not free at all. In fact, she is doubly enslaved; bound by the evil spirit that inhabits her and taken advantage of by the slave owners who use her to make money off of her fortune-telling.

It's interesting to note that she is calling Paul and Silas slaves as well, slaves of the Most High God, a position of weakness, for she knows slavery well, and declaring that they are proclaiming salvation.

Paul frees her of her evil spirit. (In fairness, I suspect he did so more out of annoyance than compassion) and promptly finds himself in trouble with her owners, who are too much slaves to their own financial gain to appreciate her newfound emancipation.

So, what do Paul and Silas get for their generosity in freeing the girl? They are dragged to the authorities, attacked by the crowd, stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison – what I would call a “bad day at the office”.

So, what do they do in prison? At midnight they are still praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listen incredulously. Their bodies may be in chains, but their spirits are free to worship.

Then an earthquake remedies the problem of the chains. The visible manifestation of God's power shakes the foundations, not only of the prisons but of the earthly powers as well. Nothing can keep His servants locked up forever, and Paul and Silas are now free to go.

The *jailer*, on the other hand, while he seems to be a free man, is so enslaved to the authorities that he is about to attempt suicide rather than face what they will do to him if he has lost his prisoners. The law of the time provided that the jailer would be responsible for serving the time of any prisoners who escaped, so this was no idle thought of suicide!

Paul and Silas assure him that they are still there. Think about it. They were free to leave, to move from a position of weakness to that of strength...to move from slavery to freedom, yet they remained. The wonderful irony of this story is that the jailer now does what he was afraid that the earthquake had done, he liberates them from, prison and brings them out to his own home.

In that act of weakness, in that gentle touch of grace, Paul and Silas give life to the jailer, who becomes a joyful follower of Jesus himself. After washing the physical wounds of the ex-prisoners, he is washed in the waters of baptism, and he and his whole household become believers in Jesus.

NOT because of a threat, or promises of power, or any other measure of strength, but by the example of grace in the form of weakness.

This jailer and his entire newly baptized household – mentioned here again and assumed to include adults, slaves and children – are rejoicing in their new-found faith as the story ends, despite the problem of the magistrates punishing him for letting such high-profile prisoners go free.

What a GREAT story of reversals! Those we assume are free (the jailer, the magistrates, the owners of the slave girl) are really those in bondage, and everyone we assume to be enslaved (Paul and Silas and the slave girl) have been freed.

Having power or prestige doesn't make you a better (or more faithful) person. Having the key to lock someone up doesn't make you a free person. Being on the inside of prison bars doesn't necessarily mean you aren't free.

The determiner of freedom is so available, so accessible, so immediate, that we don't have to wait for a key to unlock it or an earthquake to express it.

“If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

I can't help but wonder what the results of the Christian message would be today if it were preached from a point of weakness, by slaves, rather than too-often by the strong and rich and powerful.

I guess we have to choose, don't we?