

Easter 7C 2019, June 2, 2019, Acts 16:16-34, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Today's first reading spills over with an abundance of images and opportunities for preaching and learning the ways of God. So let's jump right in.

Luke, the writer of the Acts of the Apostles, along with Paul and his companion Silas are sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ in Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia, which is now in northern Greece. Philippi became the first church planted in Europe, with the support of such notable women as Lydia, a merchant in the royal and very expensive purple cloth.

They encounter a slave girl possessed by a demon. Like demons who recognize Jesus' true identity during his ministry, this demon recognizes in Paul and Silas their true identity: servants of Christ who proclaim the power of salvation. And like Jesus, Paul possesses the power to cast out demons from their unfortunate hosts.

After Paul exorcises the demon from the slave girl her owners grow enraged. Paul took away from them a very lucrative source of income. She was being used by them as a fortune teller. People paid good money to discover if the time was right to buy a field, get married, engage in commerce, have a child. Never mind they exploited a mere child to satisfy their greed. As long as the money flowed what did it matter that a child should serve a master? Notice they did not rejoice when the young girl was freed from the demon. They didn't care about her welfare. They only saw her as a money maker.

When the money dried up they suddenly discovered their hidden religious scruples. Dragging Paul and Silas before the judge, they accuse them of disturbing the peace by proclaiming novel religious practices. This is rather strange, because the Romans took a rather loose view of the religion you practiced. To them it didn't matter if you worshiped the sun, or one of the mysterious gods from the east, or even the gods of the earth. As long as you were willing to offer your sacrifice at the altar of the Roman emperor, who by this time, was accorded divinity. Paul disturbed the peace by proclaiming worship of God alone and his Son Jesus Christ.

So here's the first thing we want to notice from this story. Money, religion, and politics, taken together, are volatile. Step on someone's economic livelihood and you just might be accused of being a heretic or an agitator, or both. Proclaim a God who comes to us in a particular, historic human being, and not just as a philosophy or a way of life, and you will be accused of being intolerant and exclusive. So, to mitigate such conflicts we seek to separate economy and politics from religion. Is it truly possible? I'm not always so sure.

OK, let's move on. They're in jail after having been flogged. Does this remind us of anything? Just as Paul and the apostles are empowered to heal and

preach and cast out demons just as Jesus did, they also suffer for the sake of the gospel. The life they live, the message they proclaim, sometimes is met with stern and harsh opposition. The church's story throughout history is filled with those who possess the courage to publicly give witness to their faith in Christ. From Stephen the first Christian martyr to Christians in Sri Lanka who braved going to church on this past Easter Sunday rather than stay home and perished in a terrorist bombing.

We are reminded that following Christ always comes with a cost. We hold up the cross as a sign of that cost. The cross shows us how much the world will seek to preserve its own ways. For Paul and Silas they confronted the powers of wealth and human trafficking as the slave-girls' owners sought to exploit another human being for selfish gain. For this they were beaten and jailed.

But here's where the story takes a turn and shows us that the cross is the only way that ultimately leads to true life. Even in jail the power of God is at work. Paul and Silas were jailed, their bodies held in chains and stocks, but they were truly free as they continued to sing hymns and prayed to the God they knew was there with them. A violent earthquake shakes the jail, breaks the chains of the prisoners, and sets them free. Was the earthquake from God? Was it merely a natural occurrence? The story doesn't tell us. But when the jailer sees the prison doors flung open and assumes everyone escaped he's ready to kill himself because he knows that will be his fate if the judges find out his prisoners have escaped. When Paul shows himself still there, in the jail, the jailer repents and seeks salvation. "Believe in Jesus," Paul tells him. "You and everyone in your house will be saved." The jailer takes them home, cleans them up and the result is a whole houseful of baptized believers.

We are shown that God remains powerfully at work in the midst of hardship. Paul is beaten and jailed, and out of that experience a man and his entire family become disciples of Christ. The cross represents worldly defeat, but it is the power of God working salvation in the world. They were never more free than they were when they were bound in that jail. God is never more visible than he is when hanging on a cross.

If we're serious about following Jesus, there will be a cost. Perhaps we won't be stripped, beaten, and thrown into jail, but we might be. Such is the fate of Christians in various places around the globe. Jesus prays for his disciples that they may all be one. To be in unity as disciples means at the very least to stand with those who are bound and oppressed in various ways: in poverty, addiction, racism, human trafficking, hatred, greed. Will we take the time truly to build relationships and work for release, justice, and freedom? There will be a cost to do so. But bearing the cost, carrying the cross, leads to true freedom. It's the only way. Amen.