

Acts 16: 16-30

Free Wherever You Are

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The Congregational Church of Needham

This month our worship theme is Freedom. We enjoy a great deal of freedom in our country and those liberties are precious to most of us – the freedom to assemble, to speak openly, the freedom to vote, and the freedom to be assumed innocent until proven guilty. Living in a land where we have grown accustomed to a vast array of freedoms, we have come to expect and enjoy a certain level of personal independence in our lives. This includes the freedom to choose your career path and life course, the freedom to decide where to live, the freedom to pick a life partner, the freedom to decide if and when to have children, the freedom to engage in joint decision making in your condominiums or civic organizations, and in our UCC communities of faith. All month we have been thinking about the strong link between our own freedom today and the value that the Bible places on freedom. From the days of Moses right down to Jesus and Paul the Bible talks a lot about freedom and why it is an important component and foundation to a good life. The founders of democracy took their inspiration from the Biblical vision of how life should be. Most of us acknowledge that people like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were way ahead of their time. But if that is the case then the Bible was positively revolutionary in the way that it conceived of human existence, as an essentially free state, where children of God were all meant by virtue of their creation, to enjoy a level of autonomy.

But freedom can be both wonderful and also dangerous. Unbridled freedom leads to anarchy. The book Lord of the Flies tells about children left to their own devices on an island. With unbridled freedom they turn cunning and cruel, and build a chaotic society. Without rules for the game of life the strong prey on the weak and no one is safe. This started to happen to the Hebrews after they left Egypt; so God gave Moses the Ten Commandments – a brilliant set of guidelines that offered order, and set boundaries. Overtime wise leaders expanded and refined the laws of the community. Still things happened: David stole another man's wife and

King Ahab killed his neighbor. But when people overstepped, prophets rebuked them. The story of the abuse was a topic of public debate.

Still it was hard to know the right balance between freedom and law. When Jesus came he challenged the Pharisees, because he thought they had tipped the balance too far toward the rules they had created over time about faith. Jesus also criticized the zealots who advocated armed revolt against the Romans. What Christ offered was a third way. He appreciated the rules of faith but also enjoyed the freedom to re-write them. He believed that the world could not take away your freedom if you were not willing to forfeit it. He believed you could live in a world where people held you in contempt but still hold on to your self-esteem. He believed that you could shake hands with evil but overcome its influences through love. It was novel and unheard of then. It still is today. His followers lived with a similar zeal; no one was better at it than the apostle Paul. Today's story about Paul is a remarkably subtle and incisive comment about freedom. Let's take a look at the story.

Traveling with Silas, Paul entered a town where a slave girl was being used by her master. The woman had some form of mental illness that made her amusing to folks. She could tell fortunes and her master made money off of her. But the woman appeared to be trapped on many levels so Paul prayed to God to heal her and her emotional illness was healed. No longer afflicted with her hallucinations, she lost the ability to entertain and tell fortunes, so her master lost a source of income. He was angry, and blamed the apostles for his loss of income. He pressed charges against Paul and Silas. The Roman court upheld his claim and the disciples were thrown into prison.

In those days they would have been shackled to the stone foundations by their wrists and ankles. Unable to move much, Paul and Silas spent the evening singing hymns of faith. As it happened there was an earthquake that very night and the ground shook and the walls of the prison cracked. The Prison guard was rendered unconscious. The man running the prison was held responsible for securing the people who had been incarcerated and his life depended on delivering them. This earthquake knocked him out and when he came too and saw the damage he assumed that the prisoners had escaped. So rather than wait for the Romans to kill him, the man prepared to fall on his own sword.

But something remarkable happened in that prison. Paul recognized what this man was about to do and he called out to stop him. “Don’t harm yourself. We are all still here singing hymns. We have not left.” Incredulous, the jailer went to see for himself, and he began to listen to the music and to the stories of Jesus. Before that night was over, he asked Paul to baptize him.

What does this story say to us today? In the first people who are free see the humanity in one another. In our story the woman is a slave probably because her husband lost his land from some economic downturn. Then she was so emotionally distraught that she saw visions, and her master made money by parading her around so people could make sport of her. Most people would have seen her as an object of pity or scorn. But when Paul comes to town he sees her as a human being trapped on many levels. Trapped in an economic system where freedom is always up for grabs; trapped as a woman, the victim of her family misfortune; trapped as a slave; and then trapped by her emotional confusion. Who know? Her mental state may be the logical result of all that has happened to her. But Paul sees her as a child of God, who is desperate to be whole. While he cannot change her situation completely, he can change the fact that she is lost and isolated. He does what he can for her.

Paul does the same thing for the jailer. In the jail the Romans care so little for human life and so much about control that they contracted with local citizens to guard the prisoners with their lives in the local jails. When the jailer makes the assumption that Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners would have left, he prepared to commit suicide. One of the most remarkable moments in scripture is when Paul re-assures this man. “Don’t harm yourself; we are all still here.” Paul sees that his jailer is also trapped. He touches the place in his jailer’s heart which is lost and needs a spiritual home.

Chris Hoke is a prison chaplain to gangs and violent offenders in Skagit Valley Washington. He runs Bible studies for the inmates. He has a following for his Bible study groups because Hoke sees these men as children of God. He has just written a book called *Wanted: A Spiritual Pursuit through Jail Among Outlaws and Across Borders* in which he paints a picture of men often born to people who did not want them, boys sent

from foster care to juvenile detention to gang life. He tells of boys who found a home in a gang because they were so lost. One man named Richard Meia loved the way that Jesus surrounded himself with thieves, prostitutes and untouchables. He liked that Jesus gathered people who came from the cracks of towns and around the edges like trash. Richard was taken by the knowledge that Jesus loved those people, valued them, touched them, restored them and talked about the kingdom where they belonged. Richard died young in that prison but not before he found a faith that could not be contained by the bars. That is the challenge in this hard world of ours - to see one another as human beings.

Secondly, there is always hope. The Bible reminds us there will always be slaves and masters, but there is also hope of healing. There will be jails and empires but there are always hymns to sing. There will be systems of oppressions but God will send earthquakes that shake our foundations and usher in newness of life.

You can put Paul in jail but he will always be free. He refuses to be a victim. In jail he recruits his jailer to the new church he is founding. Hope makes you clever and wiser than despair. During the anti-apartheid movement the leaders like Nelson Mandela used the jail as a place to recruit followers and solidify their opposition to the government. The government put all these revolutionaries together and gave them time to form coalitions. Those freedom fighters were free long before apartheid ended. They were free because they refused to be victims. They were free because they saw jail as an opportunity share the message of hope.

Finally, when you know what is important you are free. Paul never loses his perspective. When he sees the slave he knows he can change her life by healing her mind. When he is in jail he is shackled but he can still sing and he figures out how to change the whole prison experience for everyone by preaching to the others. When the jailer is ready to do himself in he realizes that here is someone who should be saved. Paul understands what matters most. He does not get distracted by folly, or the world's detours. Paul writes later that God works through all things for good with those who love Christ Jesus. His freedom comes from his faith and his ability to keep his perspective.

We idolize Martin Luther King but we often overlook the fact that he knew there was a price on his head. Yet he did not stay home, or play it safe. I don't mind what the future holds. I'm not worrying about all that. I have seen the glory and I will be living life on my terms. How did he say that with such assurance? He believed there is always hope and that God is on the side of the hopeful. None of us know what God can do with our lives. When we feel trapped or lost we can remember to tell the story of faith, to sing them loudly and confidently. Paul probably sang that night to keep his own hope up and in the process God used those hymns to awaken the curiosity of the other prisoners, and to stir the heart of even the jailer. God is always closest when the stakes are highest. . Most people under-estimate God. Never lose hope. If Paul could recruit his jailer then all things are possible for those who believe in Jesus Christ.