

All Shook Up
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 16: 16-34

When I was nineteen, a freshman at UCONN, I took a humanities course that required us to volunteer in a setting that was unfamiliar. So I signed up for a Big Brothers/Big Sisters after school program in Willimantic. Organizers placed me with a couple of young teen girls, we “hung out” together three afternoons a week. I tried to help them with their homework, and they tried to teach me how to double-dutch.

I remember that the building where we met was depressing, with pale yellow chipping paint on the walls and double locks on all the doors. Some of the kids still lived with at least one parent, but many were being raised by grandparents or aunts because their parents struggled with addiction or were incarcerated.

And while it’s true that these kids were pretty street smart, they were still just children. When they were out on the basketball court or playing a game of checkers with you, they were just kids. When we ate dinner together, they complained about the food, and made jokes, told stories about their friends at home, and cracked each other up—just as kids do.

I’d forget that their home life was rough, until one of the girls told me a story of how their cousin sold their new sneakers to buy formula for their baby brother.

I would take the bus back to my comfortable and beautiful college campus at the end of these visits, wondering why some children are made to grow up faster than others. It didn’t seem right. The poverty and inequality seemed like a prison to me. What future options did they really have?

There were no obvious answers, not then and not now. But I also know that there are countless numbers of us that are working on it, and that gives me hope!

In our story this morning we meet three imprisoned characters, each was in need of being set free in his or her own way... and not one of them is named Paul or Silas. The first prisoner we encounter is a slave girl. She was what was called a diviner—someone believed to be possessed by a spirit that could tell people’s fortunes. As a slave, she wasn’t in control of her own life—she was merely a commodity.

As the story goes, as Paul and his friends were on their way to pray each day, the girl followed them through the streets of Philippi and shouted: *“These men are*

slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” That was true. But isn’t it interesting that she calls Paul and Silas “slaves of God” when she herself was a slave? Who is the real slave here?

Paul, finally became so annoyed by the spirit’s shouting that he turned and spoke to the spirit directly to come out of her. In the name of Jesus Christ, she was unshackled from the spirit that imprisoned her.

What happened to the girl after she was set free of her demon we don’t know. The text leaves her future to our imagination. Was she cast away when she no longer could generate an income stream for her captors? Did she become a follower of Jesus?

Before Paul even meets this slave girl, he encountered and converted a wealthy woman named Lydia. She, in turn, became one of the leaders of the growing church in Philippi. I like to imagine that Lydia took in that slave girl. I like to imagine that she treated her with kindness and honor as followers of Christ were told to do. I like to imagine that Lydia gave the girl work that was dignifying and humane. Eventually, maybe the girl became part of the group of wise women who went down to the river to pray each day. I like to imagine that the girl lived a new life in Jesus, set free to live as God intended for her.

The second prisoners we meet are the slave girl’s owners. These men were shareholders of the slave girl—and furious ones at that. Their lucrative income stream had been cut off! So they gathered the civic leaders and told them about the negative economic impact that Paul and Silas and the other followers of Jesus had on their lives.

They hauled the men in to court accusing them of “threatening the community’s way of life and customs.” Blaming Paul for challenging life as they knew it, shackled by their need to make money, the slave owners could not see beyond their selfishness. Greed was their own version of captivity.

What happens when economics and religious convictions collide, like when Paul released the girl from her oppression? It can have perilous consequences. When religious conviction moves beyond innocuous concern and towards real action, people take notice.

When we move from sending a few dollars to the charity of our choice to saying NO MORE to the unjust treatment of others, people notice. When economic boycotts dry up income streams, people notice - and they often get really angry.

How DO we respond to a situation where children or any human are being treated as slaves? When do we speak out against systems that use people as commodities, even if we know that our actions will shake up the authorities that be?

These are hard questions but they must be asked: How many nameless young girls and boys are there in our world who resemble this slave girl? How many children are sex trafficked domestically and internationally?

How many child laborers in sweat shops are behind that inexpensive shirt hanging in our closet? How many child soldiers are there this very moment fighting grown men's wars?¹

Like all abused children, this slave girl was bound by a spirit that she could not free herself from. She was in bondage to it, and was at the mercy of others to set her free. Just like Paul, we are mandated to be instruments of God's liberation for the most vulnerable. We can't just feel badly and wring our hands. The good news is that there are numerous faith-related agencies engaged in bringing justice to these horrific situations that we can partner with to do this work.

The third and final prisoner in our story is the jailer. He, too, was nameless. He was, in his own way, a slave to the Roman justice system. He dutifully responded to the orders given him when he threw Paul and Silas into the innermost cell and shackled their feet. He was a company guy, obedient to the responsibilities given him.

While the jailer was sleeping on the job, the prisoners were singing and praying. I like to imagine they were quoting Psalm 97 about the power of God being like an earthquake, just before the earthquake happened, which was so intense, and shook the prisoners so powerfully that their shackles fell off.

Terrified of what would happen to him when his superiors discovered he lost the prisoners, the jailer was poised to fall on his sword. But Paul called out to him these words that stopped him short: "Do not harm yourself; we are all here." These are beautiful words: "Do not be afraid; we are all here." I think we all yearn to hear and believe this in desperate times.

Celebrated Austrian psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl remains best-known for his indispensable 1946 psychological memoir *Man's Search for Meaning*—a meditation on what the gruesome experience of Auschwitz taught him about the primary purpose of life: the quest for meaning, which sustained those who survived. He wrote:

"We who lived in the concentration camps can remember those who walked through the huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread... They may have

¹ UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child spells out the basic human rights that children everywhere have: the right to survival; to develop to the fullest; to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation; and to participate fully in family, cultural and social life.

been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms...the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance.

In Auschwitz, Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate."²

Like the slave girl and the jailer in today's story, each one of us has our own form of chains or version of a demon that might want to hold us captive. What is yours? Is it doubt or fear or anxiety; an inability to forgive yourself or someone else; self-pride or painful childhood memories?

We must not be afraid to name what it is that might be enslaving us. To bring it to light and to ask for help. The question of Paul's jailer becomes THE question: *What must I do to be set free?* The answer might shake our insides like an earthquake.

Paul said, *"God has not given us a spirit of fear, instead we have been given a spirit of power and love and strength. We do not have to be overcome by fear for we are not alone to face our new freedom."* This is good news – trust it! Amen

² <https://www.brainpickings.org/2013/03/26/viktor-frankl-mans-search-for-meaning/>