

Jailhouse Rock
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Acts 16:16-40

As I get older, something my mother told me at an early age is becoming increasingly more true: we can learn important lessons from unexpected places, if we're open to it.

For example, I never expected to learn so much from my twelve-year-old daughter! More than anything else she's taught me patience. In the beginning of getting to know her, I believed the more books I read about adoption, autism and ADHD, the more TED talks I listened to about the effects of early childhood trauma, the better parent I'd be.

Those tools have been great, don't get me wrong, but the only way to really learn about her was our daily interactions. And something I learned again, but didn't deeply experience until I became her parent, is the effect of the natural world in maintaining emotional regulation.

I never thought I'd learn so much from the birds in the sky, the flowers in my garden, or the peepers that make such a racket it's like a concert in the night air. Because these are the things that help calm her and the rest of us down on the more difficult days. And every time I hear the song of the robin in the morning or smell of the aroma of hyacinths in the garden, or hear the chirps of those frogs, I'm reminded that God has given me another day in which to be thankful.

You never know when and where God is going to teach you a lesson.

I believe that's what Paul and his trusted adviser Silas discover as they're on their way to Thessalonica to spread the gospel. They decide to stop at a local house church in Philippi to receive some spiritual nurture, and there they are met by a slave girl. A slave girl with little to no socio-economic status, a girl given up on and labelled an outsider by those who knew her and those who owned her.

She's a fortune teller, and the text literally says she had the spirit of the Python, the spirit of divination within her.

In those times, it was customary to go to the Oracle at Delphi and speak to the priestesses there to receive your fortune. This act would help you figure out whether you should do something as simple as take on a new business, buy a new house, marry this or that person. Leaders would visit the oracle to decide whether they should go to war and other such things. The idea was that the spirit of Delphi would provide accurate guidance in what to do, so that you may be as most prosperous and well off as possible.

Like anything that has to do with this kind of activity, there are charlatans - people that take advantage of other's trust, and they're able to make a living that way. But then there are those in Scripture that seem to have the real thing, and it appears that this slave girl has it because Paul's going to cast it out before our story is done.

So, here we have a slave who works as a fortune teller. She's bringing in a tidy profit for her owners. She's nameless. That's because being a slave and being nameless often go together. She's just an object to be used.

But Paul sees something in this girl, whether it comes from their annoyance at her following them around for days or just knowing that she can do better than this life. He offers her healing. And she's healed.

She's not under the control of her masters anymore, she can go out and make her own way. When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they don't really care that Paul spoke in the name of Jesus.

The fact is, that whatever he and Silas are saying about Jesus is messing with their profit. Their economy is in trouble because of whoever this Jesus is. They are angry because the revenue stream has been cut off and their business has been sabotaged.

For Paul, it's not the first nor the last time this is going to happen. Just wait until he goes to Ephesus and suddenly trade goes down a lot, because the production and sale of idols are a big part of that economy. There, he will again be whipped and chained and imprisoned and all those things because of how the message is liberating exploited people.

Unfortunately, sometimes when somebody gets healed, somebody else gets mad. The people in charge of the girl get mad, they want to keep her profitable and in her place. They don't care that she's had some emotional and mental health issues that need to be addressed, they have said for

years that's not my problem. They don't have the courage or the bravery or the basic human empathy to meet her needs.

And not only do her wealthy owners get mad, but the crowd also gets mad too. Just because folks are close to you doesn't mean they're automatically invested in your health or well-being.

Paul heals this girl after many days of personally encountering her dysfunction. And he discovers from this unexpected situation that sometimes his call to follow Christ will mean he has to go against the grain and shake the status quo.

Scripture says he first called on the name of Jesus, drawing strength when he did so. And it was his personal conviction and faith in Christ that compelled him to act, which led to his arrest and imprisonment.

A conviction is not a conviction, if it does not lead to some lonely places. When God places something in your heart, you've got no other choice but to stand on it and sometimes you may find you are standing alone.

Oh, Paul is in a precarious situation. He's in jail, in a place where he can only trust in God. But the good news is that he's not there by himself, Silas is right there next to him.

Silas hasn't done anything wrong. He didn't heal the girl, Paul did. The only thing Silas is guilty of is being Paul's companion on this journey, he's guilty by association.

Maybe when we feel like we are in the pit, what we need is a Silas who will stick with us when our convictions lead us to lonely places. Because not only did Silas stick with Paul, but the text says they started doing something together there in the strange bowels of a dark, dank, lonely place.

Paul and Silas begin singing. It is midnight, the darkest hour of the night in the innermost cell of the jail. They have heavy leg irons chaining them both to the wall. They cannot get out of it. So, what do you do when you can't escape? All you can do is endure it.

Friends, we've got to learn how to have faith in the dark. We've got to learn that weeping and pain may endure for a time, but joy comes in the morning.

We've got to learn that even though we walk through the valley in the dark, that God is still with us.

What the story says happened next is that their singing and their prayers gave others encouragement. And that the jail started rocking, and everyone's chains became loose.

You may not know it, but when I see you do what you're doing and how you've come out on the other side of a difficult time, it gives me strength. When I see you persevering, it encourages my heart. And it teaches me once again that God's not through with me yet.

There's a blessing in encouraging one another.

I was walking with my daughter last fall at Wolfe Park and we saw some geese flying in formation overhead. What we know about geese is that fly as a team, as a unit, their goal to get from point A to point B together.

But if you notice the formation of a flock of geese in flight, they always fly in a V formation. And there's one goose that is at the point of that V.

That's not a coincidence. The lead goose creates a pocket of air that makes flying for the rest of the group that much easier. The lead goose hits the headwinds straight on, takes on the cross winds and breaks them so that the others have an easier path in which to fly.

Whenever you hear honking coming from a flock of geese flying in formation, know that it's not just background noise. The geese in the back of the V are honking their encouragement to the one that is in front leading, because they see what that goose is having to endure, and that she hasn't given up yet.

After some time, with her energy exhausted, she'll make a special warning sound and shift to the back of the V, as a better rested goose takes his place at the lead for a while.

That's what Paul and Silas are doing in that dark place, and what you and I ought to be in the business of doing. When I'm in the back, and you're in the front, and I see what you've been through and I see what almost took you out but you're still hanging in there, then I too am compelled to make some noise.

May God bless you for that unexpected lesson and gift. Amen.