

Acts 16: 16-34 "Many Faces of Slavery" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/2/19

Bethany Meier tells a gripping story of the day her Bible was arrested, literally. Her Bible was taken by the police, put in lock-up, held for bail money, and then released. No it wasn't some gimmick fund-raiser and no it doesn't matter what Bible version it was, Bethany's Bible was taken into custody until money was given to have it released. It all started when Bethany made the decision to work with a national non-profit organization called Soulforce which is dedicated to social justice. She was part of its annual Equality Ride, made up of 17 young adults who traveled on a bus for 2 months, visiting universities that have discriminatory policies against LGBTQ persons. Their intent was not to be troublemakers on campus, but rather to engage in a holy dialogue with persons who have been taught to use the Bible to enslave more than liberate, to abuse rather than empower. They also hoped to show students that were suffering in silence that they were not alone. The universities chosen were ones where students had reached out to Soulforce because their school's policies towards LGBTQ often meant that students found to be gay or transgender were "outed" to families, expelled, and in extreme cases, forced to undergo conversion therapy and even exorcisms. Such policies still exist to this day and I left a community outside Fresno where the local school administration battled having a Gay-Straight Alliance club on its campus. It was hard not just for my daughter Mikayla, but for so many other students whose parents wouldn't even begin to acknowledge their sexual orientation and therefore lived in isolation and despair. Soulforce was an attempt to be a voice at each college where students couldn't safely advocate for themselves.

The day Bethany's Bible was arrested was toward the end of their tour. They visited a Christian college that wouldn't even allow them on campus so they held a peaceful

demonstration on the public sidewalk. Several students came out to talk, those who agreed with the message and those who didn't. Having been informed by Soulforce that they would be coming, the school administrators arranged for police to be present who would not allow any students already on campus to come out to the sidewalk. After about an hour of this, one of the fellow travelers with Bethany asked to borrow her Bible, because they were going to try to go onto campus and have a Bible study with students on the other side of the sidewalk.

Bethany gave it to him and he rose it in the air saying to the crowd, "As a queer Christian, I desire to share my love of this book, and the love and affirmation that I find for myself within it with the students on this campus who are suffering in a culture of silence. Please let me share my faith with you!" He crossed over the sidewalk to private property, and was arrested. Four others did the same, each announcing their desire to do a Bible study with the students, and each was arrested as they crossed onto campus, Bibles and all.

As I heard this story told, I realized that there are different forms of imprisonment at work in our society and it is not necessarily the ones placed behind bars who are enslaved. This was the case with Paul and Silas in our text today who are arrested for liberating a slave woman described as being possessed by a "spirit of divination." She tells people's fortunes and has made a tidy profit for her owners. But Paul finds her annoying because she keeps following him wherever he goes, proclaiming the truth of Paul and Silas' mission to all who will hear. She is persistent, like that annoying housefly which just won't buzz off, and Paul reaches the end of his patience, chastising the illness that has seized her and he heals her. Once she has been set free, the money men who exploited her, are peeved. So they sue Paul, dragging him before the magistrates who are the ones to maintain civil order. The magistrates have them stripped of

their clothing and beaten with rods. They are then thrown in prison where the jailer is instructed to “keep them secure.” Paul and Silas pray and worship and the jail doors spring open, their shackles are loosed, and the prisoners are now free, even though they do not budge from their cells.

As we relive the drama, we come to see that the fortune teller is not the only slave in this story. The owners are enslaved to the money which they have come to rely on, the magistrates are enslaved to the law they uphold which sometimes has nothing to do with justice, and the jailer is enslaved to his fears of revenge and punishment as prison doors don’t provide the security he counted on. There is an entire culture here that is enslaved and imprisoned by greed, fear and abuse. To that culture, Paul and Silas are a stark contrast as they model a new path toward liberation, both physically and emotionally. Their prayers and worship break the physical bonds that hold the prisoners in place, but by staying put even though the cell doors are flung open, Paul and Silas ease the fears of the jailer and reveal to him a path to true freedom. Their faith and actions seem to reveal a truth that civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer declared, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” Liberation is a communal act where our freedom is ultimately connected to the freedom of all humanity.

It occurs to me that there are so many instances and circumstances in our lives which keep us enslaved, keep us locked up inside of ourselves from which we need to be freed. This week, a couple of us from St. James Lutheran, First Methodist, and our church toured the site of what will be the week-long day camp for children still recovering from the wildfires of last year. The Superintendent of Grant Elementary was leading the tour and shared how he thought that surely a year later, most of these kids would be getting over the trauma and moving on. But

trauma doesn't work that way – it takes as long as it takes, and far more of our kids are still plagued with nightmares, grief and despair than any of us would have guessed. It is the reason for this specialized experience called Camp Noah, a nationally acclaimed 20 year old preparedness and resiliency program created for children. The superintendent indicated his joy that Grant would be hosting this program because just this week he found a 7th grader on the floor in the hallway sobbing. When he asked the young lady what could possibly have her so upset, she choked out, "I miss my home so much." Sometimes being imprisoned is a result of circumstances beyond our control with the only thing that remains in our control being how we react to the trauma.

Back on that college campus where Bethany watched her Bible ride away in a squad car as those Christian college administrators smiled smugly, the remaining Soulfors folks invited the students for coffee. Several joined in and that afternoon, they ended up having some of the most transformative conversations of the entire trip. When Bethany got home, several of the students from that campus reached out to thank her via social media. Some apologized on behalf of their fellow Christian students while others sought further help on how to live an authentic life as God intended for them. But she will never forget the day her Bible ended up in jail while her faith was put into action.

Her story made me question how often it is that our Bible is in danger of making waves in our society, of ending up in jail, not in respect to whether we carry it around beating folks up with it, but in the fact of how it shapes our faith and actions, how it affects our responses when fear, abuse and greed take the upper hand? Do the words of your Bible prod your faith enough to speak up for another who is being persecuted? Someone tells a racist joke or comment,

does your faith push you to respond with discomfort, with disapproval? Someone is doing something unethical at work, in the community, in our government - are you content to stay enslaved in a culture which says look the other way, don't get involved, it could get worse...or does your faith challenge you to confront the shackles of power which clamp down on those prophetic speakers of truth? Do we let the message of a loving God free us, or is our Bible gathering dust while our faith rots out from the inside, as we try to cope with the traumas which enslave us? It is through what we do, what we say, and how we interact with one another that people see our faith. It is through our faith that liberation for all people is made possible. This is God's message to us as portrayed through stories like today – may our faith in action come to set all people free by the grace of God. Amen.