

Acts 16:16-34

In our reading from Acts 16 today we find Paul and others, including Luke, the physician who wrote the book of Acts of the Apostles, heading to a place of prayer. They are still in Troas (where they met Lydia), located in the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony. As they are heading there, to the place of prayer, they probably would have liked to have been in a state of preparation for their time of worship. That time of preparation is being invaded by a girl with a spirit of divination, in other words, someone like a fortuneteller. But she isn't telling their fortune, she is proclaiming who they are, "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Over and over again she keeps shouting this. Paul, even though it sounds as though he is fed-up with her noise, according to the translation of the Greek word that is used for "annoyed", actually takes pity on her.

Now why, you may ask, would Paul take pity on a girl who is following them proclaiming the truth about who they are? Because he recognizes her situation is not under her control. She is a slave to both an unclean spirit and to her owners. I don't think he realizes that in cleansing her of the unclean spirit he will cause such a problem, both for himself and, possibly, for the girl. She is not mentioned again however she no longer brings a steady income to her owners so she may have been thrown aside. We don't know. But when her owners discover who took her power of divination away, the power they exploited to make money, they have two of the men arrested, Paul and Silas. It's possible the other two men, Timothy and Luke weren't with them at the time of the arrest, or it could be Luke wasn't arrested because he wasn't Jewish and Timothy was too young to be considered a man, or it possibly could be because his father was Greek.

False charges were brought against Paul and Silas, they never troubled anyone, nor did they teach customs that were not lawful, and more importantly, they were both Roman citizens who never should have been taken into custody. Nevertheless, they were beaten and thrown into prison where even their feet were shackled. Put yourself in their position. How would you react? We would probably demand a lawyer and file a claim against the perpetrators of the injustice, but that wasn't an option for Paul and Silas. They were in the pit of the prison, unable to move much, with their bodies bruised and bleeding. It could have seemed as though this was the end of the road for them. But what did they do? They prayed and sang hymns to God. When all their hope was gone, they found hope by the power of the Holy Spirit directing them to reach out to God. By the direction of the Holy Spirit, they reached out to the most high God to whom they were enslaved.

Or at least that's what the diviner said. They weren't really enslaved by God; they chose to follow God. When they were in the worst situation possible they didn't blame God. They didn't cry "Foul!" They didn't mope and feel sorry for themselves. They prayed and sang hymns to God and the Holy Spirit prompted the prisoners to listen. Do you know what is incredible about this? They knew the hymns by heart! Of course in their time they couldn't rely upon hymnals to sing out of, they couldn't do internet searches for hymns to keep them going, they had to know the hymns because they were used in worship. And they definitely worshipped; they didn't go by the thought that if I'm in church at least once a month I'm a regular worshipper. No, they worshipped at least weekly, but I would think most likely they gathered daily to worship. I don't know

the content of their prayers, but I would like to think the Holy Spirit led them to pray prayers that glorified God. This would be so countercultural for us in today's day and age. We would be screaming for our attorneys and if we prayed it would be for God to release us from our prisons. But you know what? God does release us from our prisons. God releases us from our self-made prisons brought about by our insecurities, brought about by addictions to alcohol, sex, drug, and gambling, our addictions to material goods, our addictions to power and greed. God is still in the practice of miracles, we just don't acknowledge them as such.

Back in the prison with Paul and Silas, another miracle was taking place. The prisoners were listening intently to Paul and Silas. In today's world they would most likely have told the two to stop making so much noise, possibly with death threats attached. But through the Holy Spirit these prisoners were listening to what Paul and Silas were praying and singing. Then, an earthquake, one so violent that all the shackles were broken away from all the prisoners. They were set free. If that wasn't enough of a miracle, no one ran away. Can you believe it? They all stayed where they were, even though they were imprisoned.

The jailer couldn't believe it. When he came and saw the doors wide open he was about to kill himself. Better to take his own life quickly than to die at the hands of the Roman magistrate because it was his duty to keep guard over the prisoners, ensuring no one escaped. Lucky for him Paul saw what was happening and assured him all the prisoners were still there. The next logical step for the jailer to take would have been to lock them all back up and close the prison doors. But that isn't what happened, is it? No, the jailer was so grateful that his life had been spared he wanted to know what it was that kept them there together. I have a feeling, even though the text doesn't state it, I have a feeling that the Holy Spirit, working through Paul, was saving the souls of the prisoners who had listened intently to the prayers and singing of hymns. The jailer wanted in on this, so Paul tells him the good news of Jesus Christ, the one who has taken away the sin of the world. The jailer was no longer concerned with his physical death; he had seen there is something greater to be gained in this world (and the next). He accepted Jesus as his savior, and was baptized into a new resurrection life.

Did you notice how each of the people in this text were under some sort of rule? The slave girl was under the dual rule of an unclean spirit and her owners. The jailer was under the rule of the Roman government. Paul and Silas were seemingly under the rule of the jailer, but their real ruler, who wasn't an oppressive ruler as were all the rest, their real ruler was God to whom they willingly gave their lives to bring, through the working of the Holy Spirit, salvation for others.

I challenge you this week to examine your lives to find what you have allowed to rule your life. Is it something that brings a false excitement, or a false sense of security? Can that which rules your life help to bring others to Jesus? The Holy Spirit is always at work. God's grace is always surrounding us. Are we in tune with the working of the Holy Spirit? Can we be set free from the forces that separate us from God? Are we living a resurrection life?

All glory be to God.