

Sermon Text – Sunday, June 1, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus

1st Reading: Revelation 22:12-14, 16, 17, 20, 21.

2nd Reading: John 17:20-26

Scripture for Message: Acts 16:16-34 – “What Must I Do?”

John 8:31-32 records Jesus saying this, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” I mention this because this slave girl is telling the truth as she follows Paul and the others around Philippi. A couple of weeks ago the message from scripture led us to hear about the stigma of mental illness, and of the new things God does in our world. Next week our scripture readings will take us to the day of Pentecost, but prior to hearing about that day what we read today points to the power of Jesus’ presence such that entire households are drawn into God’s grace by the spirit. Drawn by the power of God’s spirit.

Jesus’ presence, the power of the spirit, truth, imprisonment, and freedom. A rich assortment of topics that flow from these scripture readings. Luke authors the book of Acts so that it reads like a drama or an action adventure. So much is going on, even in the short passage we read this morning. Paul and the others traveled in Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia. There they met Lydia and through her established a church. However, one day when they were going outside the city to pray, they encountered this slave girl who had a “gift” of prophecy earning a great deal of money for her “owners.” So, we read this slave girl followed Paul and the others proclaiming the truth about them, it’s interesting that her “truth” annoyed Paul to the point of his freeing her of this demon. “The truth shall set you free.”

Reading these first few verses we hear that Paul acted out of annoyance, there was nothing to indicate that this slave girl wanted to be free from the demon, nothing to indicate that this “possession” was a problem for her and it certainly benefitted her owners. Paul obviously felt this slave girl wasn’t in her right mind, she was what we in our current culture would consider enslaved by a mental illness. Therefore, Paul eliminated the demon from her life, acting more I think from annoyance than from compassion.

In reality though she wasn’t freed – she was still a slave, she was the property of others, and they had just lost their source of income.

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Furthermore, Paul's actions of freeing this slave girl from the demon led to a loss of freedom for himself and his companion Silas. It appears that although the residents of Philippi were fine with Lydia establishing a church and with Paul and Silas preaching and teaching, when their financial self-interests were threatened it became a problem that must be dealt with. Notice how they dealt with the problem, they did not mention the fact that releasing this girl from demonic possession had cost them money and that was what they were upset about, they accused Paul and Silas of being different and therefore guilty of political subversion.

Now Paul and Silas are in jail, in prison themselves for setting another free. They do not however lament their situation; the Holy Spirit is at work through them. God will use human actions to disrupt and transform, whatever the motives behind them. While in prison, this time chained in stocks, Paul and Silas praise God with singing and praying and the prisoners listened to them. Luke does not tell us if the jailer listened also, but I'll bet he was based on what happens in our story.

So, Paul and Silas are in prison, and there is an earthquake strong enough to crumble walls, open the cell doors and break open the chains. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured and for some reason the prisoners remained where they were. They were free but now we notice that the jailer does not feel free, he is imprisoned by the expectations of the empire and his fear of the Roman authorities led him to impose a death sentence on himself. The fact that the prisoners had not escaped is what sets the jailer free from his fears and has him asking the question "What must I do to be saved?"

This action-packed story has all the elements of drama and several plot twists in it. Those who were first thought to be free became imprisoned – the slave owners imprisoned by financial self-interests; the jailer imprisoned by fear of the power of the empire. Those who were imprisoned by the world's powers were set free by the spirit's power. There is salvation in the story but not salvation that came about by what one individual did, the jailer asked what must I do – without realizing that his salvation would come through the power of the Spirit.

The jailer first learns of the good news of Jesus Christ not from a pew, but by observing the power of God accompany brave

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disciples. Paul and Silas and the other prisoners did not try to escape when the chains broke, and one wonders why not except that the opportunity was present for them to lead souls to Christ. Paul and Silas sacrificed their freedom for Christ. And it wasn't just the jailer who received salvation that day, he, and his entire family were baptized and became believers. Salvation is not just a personal thing; salvation occurs through an experience of community which brings the believer into the whole family of God.

So, what must we do is probably a more appropriate question today? What must we do to bring others to Christ; what must we do to ensure salvation for others so that every knee shall bow and every tongue confess? Knowing however that it is God's will not our own, what must we do when someone asks, "What must I do to be saved?"

If we, as a church, desire to follow the examples laid out for us in the book of Acts, maybe we need to get into a little trouble with worldly powers. Paul and Silas won over the jailer's entire household, not from outside the prison but within the prison walls and bound by chains. Luke tells many tales in the book of Acts about the disciples speaking truth to power, preaching after they are told not to preach and getting into trouble, but that trouble wins souls and increases the number of Jesus' followers. I read in a commentary that, "The church that gets itself in trouble with powerful forces finds the gospel message much easier to preach."¹

This is, of course, not a call for your pastor or any of you to go out and get arrested to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. But it is a reminder that conversion is not a program or strategy but the natural outcome of the fearless proclamation of the gospel (IBID). Fearlessness that illustrates God's power in the lives of believers. Fearlessness that enables bold proclamation of the truth in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The church must realize that we are enabled by God's power through the Holy Spirit to preach and teach boldly. We are enabled to help others find for themselves the path of God's direction. You've heard it from me before – it is not our job to save

¹ Andrew Foster Connors. "Seventy Sunday of Easter – Acts 16:16-34: Connecting the Reading with the World" *Connections Year C, Vol. 2 – Lent through Pentecost*. Eds. Green, Long, Powery, & Rigby. WJK. 2018. Print. 305-306

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but it just might be our job to lead people to the fount of living water that Jesus offers so they might find salvation.

Jesus didn't call people to conform; he did not place qualification on those who were healed by his presence. In the reading from John's Gospel this morning we hear Jesus praying for the disciples, not only them, but he also prays for those who will believe because of them. Jesus prayed and then sent them out to "make disciples of all nations. . . Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Through the deeds and words of the disciples and the many who have come after them over the course of more than two-thousand years we have come to believe and to be included in the community of believers.

So, what must a church do? Pray for others, show in our words and deeds what it means to follow Christ so others can see. Be bold enough to speak truth to power, stand against injustices wherever we find them, and follow the examples of the saints before us. But speak authentic truth, not just your own truths. Maybe doing that, in a climate of dissension and discourse will get us into a little bit of trouble – like Paul and Silas. Jesus, however, has told us, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

So, whether from the chains of actual imprisonment or some other sort of virtual imprisonment – prayer and praise are keys to the kingdom. In our everydayness or in the sacred spaces of this sanctuary the people of God's kingdom in this and in every church must speak truth – even if that truth gets us in a little bit of hot water. This we do for God's glory not our own and then we can proclaim – "The Lord is King, let the earth rejoice."