

FCCS June 2, 2019
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“With the People” Acts 15:30 – 18:21

Today we hear about the Apostle Paul’s Second Missionary Journey (49-52 C.E.) as recorded in the book of Acts. Paul is accompanied by a fella named Silas, who was a leader in the early church, and specifically chosen by Paul specifically for his expert teaching abilities. Silas was a Hellenistic Jew and a Roman citizen, that becomes important later in the story.

Paul’s journey has taken him from Jerusalem north to Antioch of Syria and then westwards through the interior of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia (modern day Greece) wherein Paul and Silas introduce the Gospel to the continent of Europe for the first time. (Turkey being in Asia and Greece in Europe).

They have three significant encounters on this leg of the journey;

- 1) First Paul and Silas meet Lydia of Thyatira at Philippi. After hearing their stories about Jesus, she is baptized as a believer and regarded as the first documented convert to Christianity in Europe.

- 2) Next, they encounter an unnamed slave girl, thought to be possessed by a demon whom Paul exorcises from her which leads to them being thrown into Jail.

- 3) But that is where they meet the jailer who by the end of the night is himself be baptized along with his entire family. Man, recruiting new members used to be such a breeze!

Paul and Silas will ultimately be released from captivity because of their privilege allowed by their Roman citizenry, which is kind of ironic. The three people Paul and Silas meet along the way have one thing in common, they are all outsiders; a spinster, a slave, and a Gentile (sounds like a bar joke...)

Have you ever felt like an outsider, like someone who doesn't quite belong? It is certain that those hearing these early stories of the church felt that way. Which is why what happens in these conversions is miraculous.

With their baptism into the family of Christ, outsiders are welcomed into the body of a new movement, they belong. We know well that they will still be marginalized, some will even be killed for their beliefs, but they are a part of something bigger than themselves.

This is another story about the power of "with-ness. It is also about discovering God in people where they are. We in the church sometimes expect people to come to us, but none of these folks come to Paul or Silas, Paul and Silas are "with" them.

I watch a lot of Netflix streaming; I watch while I do dishes and fold laundry. I make my way through series (especially British crime stories) at an astonishing clip. My family likes to watch certain shows together as well, we loved "The Great British Baking Show", and another cooking one called, "Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat." Ellie likes the one about Anne of Green Gables called "Anne with an E" and we recently watched a documentary series about the history of the Circus.

It was mesmerizing to learn about how this form of entertainment evolved. And we had to know it was coming, although it was easy to forget for a little while, how some of the animals and performers were ultimately mistreated. In the beginning of the series we got swept up in the narrative of traveling Circus going from town to town and being good for everyone.

Part two of the series, revealed the shadier side of the industry; fires that destroyed whole animal menageries, people falling to their deaths putting up the big top in the middle of the night and entire herds of elephants wiped out for the capture of one baby to be used as a prize attraction.

It was the second part of the series that brought the reality of the story into full view. I think what sometimes happens in the biblical stories is that we never get to see part two. We see the pilot and maybe season one, but don't stay with a story long enough to watch how it plays out for each of the characters.

For example, Lydia; now we know a little more about Lydia because we learn later that her home became a safe haven for traveling disciples. Lydia was a woman of means, so the risk of becoming a follower of Jesus, might not have exacted so high a price as for the others in the Gospel stories.

If there had been a season two, I wonder what we might have learned about the enslaved girl whose masters were making money off her circus like fortune telling talents. If it is true that she was possessed by an evil spirit, and that by rebuking that spirit Paul called it out of the girl, the next question has to be what became of her?

She is still a slave, but now no longer possessing the commodity of use to her captors. We see what happened to Paul and Silas at the hands of the disgruntled slave owners they were stripped naked, dragged into the town square, and beaten with rods before being cast into prison.

One might like imagine that this girl is set free to become part of a community of believers, but no where in the story does it actually make that plain. It is also quite possible that what may have seemed like liberation to Paul, was in fact a death sentence for the enslaved girl now no longer of worth to her masters.

Liberation is never a one and done affair, the gospel stories sometimes overlook the lengthy commitment needed to sustain “freedom” spiritual or otherwise.

And what of the jailor who not only sets his captors free, but takes Paul and Silas into his own home where he and his family become baptized as believers. I doubt the jailor’s job will be waiting for him upon return the next day. And I imagine that life in this little village is about to become quiet complicated for the former jailor and his family, as he is now publicly marked as one who has betrayed the system.

I’m not saying, “being saved” isn’t in and of itself amazing, I am saying that isn’t the end of the story, it really just begs the question “saved for what?”

If belief in a living God and actual experiences of the presence of God in and through community is what “saves” us, how are we daily compelled to live in ways that reveal that reality?

In his groundbreaking work published in 1968 called, "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*," Paulo Freire examines the idea that though it may not be an ideal dynamic, there is a balance shared between the oppressor and the oppressed and once that balance is upset, there will be consequences—some foreseeable, others not.

The benevolent and well-meaning disciple may find it difficult to understand that the powerless in society can be frightened of freedom. Freedom, therefore, must be pursued constantly and responsibly. "Freedom is not an ideal located outside of (a person); nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion".

According to Freire, true freedom is grounded in informed action and is a result of a balance between theory and practice. In other words, **freedom is only as good as it is useful to people** and all the theories in the world about potential means toward salvation may not be what people actually want or need.

Revolutions of resiliency are built on human agency, everyone, the liberator and the liberated must be collaborators in building the new reality. Done this way, liberation takes a long time, but if something is worth doing it is worth doing right.

Think about climate change, housing and immigration, these situations will not be solved without hearing from and working with the very people most affected by unfair policies and practices. And we can't expect them to come to us, we have to be willing to meet them where they are, and to discover how God is manifest in their locations and in their ways of living.

Paul and Silas make disciples and move on. It seems most of Jesus' didn't stay in one place long, didn't sign a contract for the second or third seasons. Spreading the the good news far and wide was the goal of the early church. I think in this generation; the job of discipleship looks quite different, not so much about dropping in, offering salvation then pushing off for new lands. No, I think the job of the church today is about making a commitment to stay in it for the long haul. It's about building trust in relationships and getting proximate to issues that matter to the well-being of all concerned. This work can be slow and tedious, in the end it may be difficult to see much if any difference— that is the hard truth about justice work there is no obvious beginning, middle or end.

There is a great story about a Rabbi and a rabbinical student; the student in his first years of study was totally overwhelmed with the laws to learn and with which to be in compliance- turning to his teacher he said, “teacher, I am so overwhelmed what should I do.” And the Rabbi said wisely, “choose one.” Amen