

Freedom

Sermon given by John Kemble

Sunday, July 17, 2022

The worship team of this Church started on a trip through the Book of Acts in June, and two weeks ago Pastor Rob introduced us to the leading Evangelist of the New Testament. Paul, previously known as Saul, encountered the Risen Christ, and his work and travels constitute most of the rest of Luke's account of the Acts of the early leaders of the Church. Last week the Youth of this Church spoke to us about how the Holy Spirit leads us to help others, a continuing result of the example set by Paul and other leaders of The Way. Today, Paul's travels to Philippi and his encounters there will be our concern. Before I start, though, let me give credit where credit is due. I do not have the level of theological training your Pastors do, so I have sought help from outside sources. Three of them are used in what follows. A web site Amplify Media introduced me to the Rev. Dr. Carol Corvin-Dillon, the Senior Pastor at West End UMC in Nashville, TN. Her six minute video on today's scripture talks about places we may not want to go. A book by Church of England Bishop N. T. Wright, "Acts for Everyone, Part Two," gave me insight into three forces at work. Methodist Bishop William H. Willimon illuminates freedom for us in his book "Acts."

As Pastor Rob pointed out, it took some years before Paul ventured out from the church at Antioch in the company of Barnabas. Over the next three years they traveled to the island of Cyprus and then to an area perhaps 300 miles north-west of Antioch, then back home to Antioch. They made a favorable report of what God had done through them. Some men from the home church in Judea came to Antioch and reminded everyone that Moses taught the custom of circumcision. This was contrary to what Barnabas and Paul had been teaching: Why make the Gentiles suffer through that? To settle this dispute Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem for a council with the apostles and elders. Have you ever been involved in a church that had a dispute over a serious question? Our denomination is deeply divided over some issues and the leaders keep postponing a General Conference that is our designated forum to resolve matters. Ah well--- After some discussion the council wrote a letter to the Antioch believers freeing

them from the more arduous burdens. A group of men, including Silas, returned with Paul to deliver the news. Paul remains there preaching and teaching the word of the Lord. Sometime later Paul decides to visit places he had been to before. He separates from Barnabas and takes Silas instead. This begins his second missionary journey. He collects Timothy along the way. They are prevented by the Spirit from entering Asia and end up in Troas. There a man in a vision urges Paul to come over to Macedonia. They sail across the Aegean Sea and come to Philippi. On Sabbath they go to the river that is a local meeting place. There is no synagogue in this Roman colony, but the women find a place to meet. Here they meet Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, who converts to Christ and urges them to stay. Paul and Silas use the time to spread their message to the locals. They are followed by a slave girl who loudly proclaims them to be “slaves of the Most High God”. Paul becomes annoyed by this attention, and commands the spirit that is in her to come out. This girl has been using divination talents to make money for her owners, and they are upset at the loss of the money-making ability. Paul and Silas are seized and turned over to the authorities, who beat them and throw them into prison for disturbing the peace. These Romans accuse them, as Jews, of advocating customs not lawful for Romans to follow. The two are placed in stocks deep in the prison. Paul and Silas have a prayer and hymn singing session well into the night. An earthquake happens and the chains are removed and cell doors opened. The jailer in charge is frightened because his prisoners are free and contemplates suicide. Paul intervenes and shows they have not escaped. The jailer is amazed and asks to be saved from punishment. Paul leads him to seek Christ and he and his whole family accept salvation. In the morning the authorities order them released. Paul says he is a Roman citizen and has been treated poorly. An apology is given and they go back to Lydia’s house. Paul gives further encouragement to these people, then he and Silas move on to Thessalonica.

Each of the sources I mentioned before has an interesting take on this whole story. The Anglican Bishop, N. T. Wright, presents the idea of three themes, and I hold the same themes are around today. First there are strange forces in play with the young slave girl. She so troubles Paul with her incessant naming that he

takes action. It is somewhat hard for me to see his action as the correct response. Still, he takes action rather than ignore what he sees as harassment. And do we ignore our present day arguing of left wing-right wing radicals and the unkind words back and forth that demonize each other? Do the road rage incidents come to mind? Are parents aware of the dark holes in the internet that their children may be diving into? But the action brings to bear the second idea: Profit. She is no longer a source for wealth to her keeper. All it costs him is room and board, nothing in wages. Is it a stretch to suggest some present day business owners are too interested in profit to pay a fair wage? Then comes religious and political pressure. Hey, we are Romans who worship Ceasar and Greek gods, you are from another country and a Jew. Our trusty jailer will keep you locked up. But the earthquake comes and the prisoners are freed. The jailer thinks that literally is the death of him. He asks Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Wright offers a more personal version of the plea: "Gentlemen, will you please tell me how I can get out of this mess?" The jailer will be surprised to receive a spiritual concept of salvation, not a way to get out of trouble.

Rev. Colvin-Dillon's experience related to this scripture is about being in a prison. She shows that the prayer and song session Paul and Silas had can be normative for a prison time. Her church participated in a ministry to prisoners in a maximum-security place. To reach the chapel where she could conduct a service meant passing through several gates, each of which shut behind her, and handing over her purse and all other belongings. Once the prisoners filed into the chapel she led worship. At the end of the communion sacrament, she offered the words of grace: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. The prisoners responded: In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. She was struck by the mutual forgiveness exchanged; she needed it as much as her listeners. Every time we are offered forgiveness by another in Christ's name it is a blessing, a release from a prison we might not even realize we are in.

Bishop Willimon explores freedom in his comments on our lesson for today. "There is freedom and then there is freedom," he says. In the story there is a woman, even a rich woman, a recent convert, who offers hospitality to two men. Not the norm. The slave girl owners don't complain about a revenue loss but that

these men are not like us! And then democracy springs into action with a crowd joining in on the attack. After having their freedom taken away Paul and Silas give praise to God in prayer and song. An earthquake follows and the jailer thinks the best thing for him to do is fall on his sword. Instead, he accepts the Good News of the Risen Christ and is baptized. Willimon sums it up this way: "What is freedom? By the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free-the girl's owners, the judges, the jailer-is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved-the poor girl, Paul, and Silas-is free."

Today, how should I react to this message of action in a new place, opportunities for good works, trials in my efforts, and the Grace of God shown in the results? I look at the last two weeks right here at UCMG. A new adventure is planned for and about to start: Digging for geothermal energy. An obstacle in the bursting of plumbing pipes shuts everything down. But quick action by our on-scene lay people turns us back to open again. Not nearly as dramatic as what Paul and Silas faced, still, a fine reaction.

Look around you at today's current issues. The election season is before us and sides will be taken. I am not advocating any cause or suggesting which side of a cause to take. But your freedom lets you find one you believe in and become involved. Learn about it and sign up to help. Recognize that some of your family and friends may not like your advocacy, others may cheer you on. It's not likely you will be put in jail for the cause, but whatever comes your way you can lean on the stories of those who have gone before you and find a way forward.