

“Who Is Free?”

Acts 16:16-34 John 8:31-36

If there is one virtue on which we can all join hands, it is freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of religion. Freedom to think and to teach what we believe. Freedom is a blessed treasure of the pulpit – freedom to speak as one feels led by God to speak.

Who is free? Our custodians know to turn on the burglar alarm before leaving the locked up church. We know to get our next drug prescription ordered in plenty of time so it comes “express-script” in the mail before we run out of pills. We fear how much our health insurance will cover just as we fear driving through certain parts of town. Surrounded by our burglar alarms and medicine cabinets and our fears – heart attacks, impotency, dementia, having 5 toes amputated and we ask, “Who is free?”

And yet I would have to say that we Americans have built a society which has given unprecedented freedom to its citizens. I can freely pursue whatever I want as long as I don’t bump into you while you’re getting yours. What we call culture is often a vast super market of desire where citizens are treated as little more than self-centered consumers.

You and I have freedom of choice, but now what do we do with that freedom? We are free but also terribly lonely and terribly driven. The 8 to 5 job, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed kids, dog eat dog competition in school, at work, and even in our homes.

This is our freedom. Maybe one of our problems with freedom is that we may not know what true freedom is. Acts 16 tells stories about people in Philippi who were in bondage and people who were free. Who in the story is really free?

Paul and Silas were going to the place of prayer and were accosted by a slave girl. Because this girl could tell people fortunes, she made money for her owners, who hired her out to read palms and provide entertainment at business conventions and rib cook-offs. She was possessed by a demon after all – mentally unbalanced we would say. She took to following Paul and Silas around, shouting at them, saying things about them. Here is a picture of enslavement – the grip of mental illness, schizophrenia, some “demon” which holds the victim in bondage.

Paul has enough of the young woman’s raving and in the name of Christ cures her. Thank God, she is free! Yet no, she is not free. She is a slave, someone who is not a person but a piece of property.

Verse 19 “but when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities”. The Philippian Chamber of Commerce moves into action.

One day Jesus healed a mentally deranged man by casting his demons into some swine. For this act of charity, he was promptly escorted out of town by the local Pork Growers Association.

At Ephesus, Paul had a big revival and many were converted and it was all wonderful – except for the members of the local 184 of the International Brotherhood of Artisans of silver shrines to Artemis whose business was negatively affected by this sudden influx of Christianity into their city. They did not like it at all and got rid of Paul.

Here is a young woman, chained her whole life to hell of demon possession and now she is free! There ought to be rejoicing! But no, her owners are not free enough to do that. It was fine to give a dollar to the Mental Health Association drive last fall, but this is another matter.

Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so her owners do what the vested interests always do when their interests are threatened.

The girl's owners say to the judge, "We're not against a little religion – as long as it is kept in it's place". In verse 20 they said to the judge, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe".

No, we do not come right out and say that our financial self-interest is threatened; we say that our nation is threatened by these missionaries who are foreigners. Besides, they are Jews and we all know what they are like – money grabbing and materialistic. If the nationalism and the anti-Semitism fail to work, we'll throw in an appeal for old time religion by saying, "They advocate customs not lawful for us to practice".

Nation, race, tradition – all stepping into line behind the dollar. Then the crowd falls into line behind the business leaders of the town by attacking and beating Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas are put into the back cell of the town prison and the jailer takes their feet and locks them in the iron shackles. Sounds like the Cuyahoga County Jail. The liberators have become the imprisoned. Jesus has helped set a pitiful young woman free, but two of his people get jailed in the process. That Jesus who preached, "You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free." He ended up on a cross.

Paul and Silas end up in prison. Verse 25 “about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them”. Wait, these men in chains, legs locked in shackles are singing, praying, having sort of a rally in jail.

The earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone’s chains fall off. The jailer wakes, and when he sees the doors are open, he is horrified. Knowing what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners to escape, he draws his sword and prepares to do the honorable thing for disgraced jailers. Having the key to someone else’s cell does not make you free.

Verse 28 Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself for we are all here.” The jailer says, “But you were bound in chains, now you are free to escape”. Paul says, “No, we prisoners are free and you, our jailer, were chained but now are free to escape”.

Verse 30 – Then the jailer brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” What do I have to do to be free?

Verse 31 – They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household”.

Verses 33-34 – At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

What is freedom? Who is free? By the end of the story, everyone who at first had appeared to be free – the girl’s owners, the judges, the jailer – is a slave. And everyone who appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Paul, and Silas – is free.

Who is free? Surrounded by burglar alarms, medicine cabinets, fears of heart attacks, impotency, dementia, cancer, mortgage payments, over-programmed children in a dog eat dog world – who is free? There is freedom and then there is freedom.

In John 8:31, Jesus said, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”.

They stiffened their necks, held their heads high, and answered, “What is this ‘will make you free’ business? We are descendants of Abraham and have never been in bondage to anyone”.

They lied. The ones who spoke so pridefully of their freedom spoke with the heel of Caesar upon their necks – slaves of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Rome, and anybody big enough to raise an army and blow through town. In truth they were not free.

Verse 36 – Then Jesus said, “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed”. At Philippi it was demonstrated that there is freedom and then there is freedom. Who is really free?

May the freedom of God . . .

#710 – Let Streams of Living Justice