

Liberated and vulnerable (Acts 16:16-34)

Like the characters in Acts 16, we are imprisoned to power structures.

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I find Acts difficult to preach on. The stories in Luke's "sequel" are long, and they're about events that are hard to relate to. The Holy Spirit in Acts is so present, active, and effective that it's tough to find analogues, at least in my life. The Holy Spirit works much more subtly in my life and in life in general as I perceive it all.

That said, the structures of society are now as difficult to resist as they were then, in the story of the slave girl, the resultant imprisonment of Paul and Silas, and the prison guard who'd rather die by suicide than face the wrath of his overlords. Both the characters in this story and those of us living today are enslaved and imprisoned to power structures that the Holy Spirit would work against, according to the testimonies of stories like this. The Holy Spirit liberates.

The girl is enslaved because of the spirit that occupies her, which makes her of value to her enslavers. When she recognizes a different "master" at work in her immediate world, the living God whose generative power is love and whose character is faithfulness, she can't but holler about it, to the point of annoyance. It isn't compassion that motivates Paul to liberate her from this thing that makes her both powerful and vulnerable to exploitation. Nonetheless, liberation is what she gets, though it redounds as imprisonment for Paul and Silas.

Yet this too is only for a time. The prison that holds them is no match for the liberating Spirit, who frees the inmates—making the warden vulnerable, until Paul intervenes in his attempt to bring on his own death.

The whole series of Spirit-disrupted events is an indictment of the structures of the world, whether those structures are as literal as a prison or as “spiritual” as human exploitation and money-making. None seems tolerable to the Holy Spirit, whose presence is itself a disturber of worldly peace, the peace of the “good enough.”

Were I to preach on this story, I’d search out analogues which might not be as difficult to find as it first seemed:

- What spirits at work today make the enslavement or exploitation of people hard to resist? Does someone in your church or town or household or political movement have some quality that seems a strength but plays out as vulnerability to being exploited—whether beauty or intelligence or charisma or compassion or actual physical strength—and therefore is in need of being freed, free now to serve not a worldly master but to serve God and the good?
- What happens when people who’ve been propping up the “good enough” are called out of that expedient service, called to something more of the true and eternal? What happens when those “good enough” structures wobble and those who count on them react, redouble? How can the church offer an alternative that is better, more sustaining, more gracious, more of God?
- The most vulnerable among us are often put to the most fundamental propping up of powers and principalities, such that the undoing of these powers comes not as promise but as danger. When a building collapses, those at the foundation bear the brunt of its fall—and so much of our global society and economies are built on the backs of the poor, the enslaved. For such as these, even though what lies beyond these powers is true freedom, that doesn’t make the getting there a guaranteed easy ride. How can we ensure that the passage from enslavement to freedom doesn’t bring more cause for danger than for hope?

That’s the church’s task, it seems to me: to be that ark of deliverance. This is our “why.” The nettlesome questions are in the “how.” A preached word in building that ark would do well here, challenging though it shall be.