

The Seventh Sunday of Easter
June 2, 2019
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Acts 16:16-34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17:20-36

Over the past weeks of Easter, we've been hearing stories of the early Church in our readings from the Acts of the Apostles. The stories chronicle both the challenges and the successes of the first Christians, the highs and lows of those early years.

Last Sunday, and again today, we've been following just one chapter on that roller coaster of a story, the ups and downs of the missionary effort in the ancient Roman city Philippi.

The Episcopal priest Frank Hegedus tells a story NOT from the Bible that serves almost as a parable on these "vicissitudes" of life. The way he tells it, it goes something like this:

A farmer had a fine stallion that one day escaped and ran off. The farmer's neighbors commiserated with him. "What bad luck you have," they said sadly. But the farmer responded, "Who really knows? It could be bad. But it could also be good."

Sure enough, the very next day, the stallion returned followed by twelve wild and healthy young steeds. "How fortunate you are!" exclaimed the neighbors. "Who knows," countered the farmer to his neighbors' surprise, "if it is good fortune or not?"

Not long after, the farmer's strapping son attempted to break one of the wild horses when he tumbled and shattered his leg. "How unlucky you are!" exclaimed the neighbors. The farmer shrugged his shoulders and asked again, "Who knows if it is bad luck or good?"

Later, the king's soldiers arrived, recruiting young men for battle and war in far-off lands, but they quickly passed over the farmer's son with the bad leg. "How very lucky you are," said the amazed neighbors as the old man muttered once again, "Who knows? Maybe it is good, maybe it is bad." ⁱ

I think he tells that story – and certainly I re-tell it today – to encourage us to notice something beyond the ups and downs of a movement. I think it helps us pay attention to the remarkable equanimity of Paul and Silas in the faces of all that happens to them in Philippi.

So let me offer a re-telling of what happened in Philippi. And I'll have a bit of fun at Silas's expense – though he doesn't deserve it at all – and let him be like the farmer's neighbors.

Last week, we heard how Paul and Silas came to be in Philippi in the first place. Paul had a dream, a vision of a man who called to him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." It was all the encouragement he needed, so he set out to find the man in his dream.

Silas says to Paul, "This is great. We have a calling. We have a plan." And maybe Paul says in reply, "Who knows? Maybe we do. Maybe we don't. Let's go; we'll find out soon enough."

So they go. But when they get to the main city in the region, it's a thoroughly Roman place. No synagogue to preach in. No sign of the man in his dream. And Silas says to Paul, "This is terrible. I thought this was what God wanted us to do." And Paul replies, "Well, maybe it's terrible. Or maybe it'll all be fine. Let's wait and see."

So they wait a few days. And then, on the Sabbath, they go outside the city gates to a river where they heard that some people went to pray. And still there's no man. But there are women – including a woman named Lydia, a woman of means. And she responds to what Paul has to tell her and is baptized, she and her whole household. She has the wherewithal to fund the mission trip and she invites Paul and Silas to stay with her. And Silas says to Paul, "This is exactly what we've been hoping for and praying for." And Paul would have to agree, but cautiously perhaps: "Maybe this is the answer to our prayers. Or maybe it's a problem in the making. Time will tell."

And that's where we pick up the story this morning. Things seem to be going according to plan. Paul and Silas are getting noticed. But not all of the attention is welcome, it seems. A slave girl takes to following them, making a nuisance of herself. And Silas complains about her, "Nobody is paying attention to what we have to say. We cannot be heard over her cries." And Paul says, "She's a nuisance, sure. But nothing that cannot be overcome."

Paul casts out the "spirit of divination" in her. And Silas is relieved. "Thank God for that," he says. And Paul wonders, "Maybe it's a blessing. Maybe it's a curse in disguise."

Soon enough, it seems to become a curse. That "spirit of divination" in the girl made money for the men who claimed her. And without that gift, she's lost her value to them. And so these wealthy men drag Paul and Silas before the civic authorities. The crowd joins in the attack fueled by religious and ethnic bigotry. The "kangaroo court" convicts them, strips them naked, beats them with rods, and sentences them to the "innermost cell" of the prison – the deepest, darkest pit they could find for them.

And I imagine poor Silas lamenting how horribly wrong it's all gone for them: "Could it get much worse?" But Paul seems to see it as an opportunity, so he somehow gets Silas to join him in prayer and in singing. And the other prisoners listen to them.

And then, of course, as they're singing away, an earthquake strikes. Unpredictable and terrifying ... especially, I'd imagine, for those locked in a prison. If Silas once wondered if it could get worse ... the answer would seem to be yes: "This is going from bad to worse!" But Paul remains, saying, "Maybe it's the worst thing that could happen to us. Or maybe it's an opportunity."

And it proves to be an opportunity, at least for the jailer – though he was not quick to see it that way. The jailer wakes up. And when he sees that the doors are open, he is horrified. He knows what happens to jailers who allow their prisoners to escape, so he draws his sword to do what honor demands of a disgraced jailer. And now he's the one who laments, "Why did this have to happen to me?" But again Paul speaks up, "Don't do harm yourself," he says. "We're all here."

As I reimagine the story this way, Paul seems completely unaffected by the twists and turns of changing circumstances. But is this merely a philosophical position?

Perhaps. But to me, it seems to show him as completely steadfast about the task before him. Whatever goes on around him, he knows why he's there, and remains true and steady.

And yet we're never told how he managed it. Or how we might do the same.

The jailer asks, "what must I do to be saved?" But I'm not sure he's asking quite the question we hear; I don't think he's asking about getting into heaven after he dies. No, given the twists and turns of this story, I think "what must I do to be saved?" means something more like, "what must I do to be free?" Because in that moment he sees in Paul a freedom that he himself lacks. Paul is the prisoner, but he carries a freedom the jailer – the one who holds the keys – lacks. ⁱⁱ

Indeed, that's the central irony of the whole of this morning's account: the prisoners are the only ones who are free. The jailer is obligated to follow orders. The magistrates are bound by the demands of the merchants. The crowd is driven by religious and ethnic prejudice. The merchants are controlled by the fear of loss of revenue. The slave girl is doubly constrained: possessed by the spirit of divination at the outset and appallingly she's left a slave at the end. And it is she who spells out the irony from the start: a slave, she announces that Paul and Silas are "slaves of the Most High ... who proclaim the way of salvation!" ... that is to say, the ones described as (and treated like) slaves are the ones who open the path toward freedom.

We're never told the source of Paul's freedom in Philippi, so we're left to infer.

Maybe that's why this story fits in with this morning's gospel. Every year, on the 7th Sunday in Easter, we hear a portion of the 17th chapter of John ... and so we hear a portion of a prayer Jesus prayed on the night before his crucifixion. Jesus prays for his disciples and (all-but-explicitly) Jesus prays for you and me, as well. Anticipating how hard life could be, Jesus prays for us, that we would be grounded in God, grounded in the love of God ... and not in the chances and changes of this world.

You may recall that one of Paul's letters is the Letter to the Philippians. He addressed it "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi ..." Some think he may have sent it directly to Lydia, knowing she'd read it to others ... perhaps the jailer and his household among them.

He was, once more, in prison at the time of its writing. And true to form, Paul seems untroubled by his situation. He expresses confidence that the circumstances of life have little importance.

And so, near the end of this letter, Paul he offers these encouraging words:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through the One who gives me strength.

Philippians 4:11b-13

It's a secret to learn in this life. No easy fix, but to find our strength in love is, it seems, a good place to set off on the way of salvation, along path that sets us free.

ⁱ Frank Hegedus @ <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/sermon/there-story-or-parable-easter-7-c-2010>.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, in *Acts - Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988), puts the point this way:

The earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open and everyone's chains fall off. The jailer wakes, and when he sees that 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. Iron bars do not a prison make.

Paul shouts, "Don't do it. We're all here, just singing." 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 you are free to escape.

And the jailer asks, "What do I have to do to be saved" (v. 30)? What do I have to be free?