

Acts 16:16-34
John 17:20-26

SGL
CCNS

The Dangers of Healing

Preacher with band aid on his chin; "I'm sorry about this band aid. I cut my chin this morning when I was thinking about my sermon"

Voice from the congregation: "Next time, why not think about your chin and cut the sermon?"

The Christian church started out as work for justice and for freedom. Even Jesus' prayer of unity for his disciples – indeed for all who follow Christ – shows his intention that all should work together for this goal. "That they may all be one..." doesn't mean Jesus expected there to be no arguments or various points of view. It does mean that our vocation as Christians is in essence to bring healing to a broken world.

That sounds like a very tall order indeed. Ah, but look at the way Jesus worked. Or how his disciples healed others. Always individuals or small numbers of people. We see today how Paul and Silas interacted with people. Our story from Acts finds Paul and Silas in Macedonia. They have gone there at the request of someone to come and help. Earlier they meet Lydia and bring healing to her home. This time, their paths cross with a nameless slave woman. She follows them for days, it seems, shouting after them: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

We find out that those who own her have been using her to make money from her fortune-telling abilities. They haven't seemed to mind her shouting out in the streets – free advertising is good for business. Then everything changes. Paul, in a moment of irritation, frees this woman from both the spirit that possessed her, and unwittingly, from the masters who now have no need of her.

What happens after her liberation we do not know, as this is only part of the story. Paul's impetuous actions rile the former slave owners, now stripped of their livelihood. The two are hauled off to prison and instead of worrying or cursing, they sing. In the night, an earthquake shakes the jail, opens the chains, and freaks out the prison guard, who is about to commit suicide. He knows his Roman bosses will surely take his life in more creative ways for his lack of oversight at the prison.

But there are Paul and the rest of the prisoners still in their cells. It is this one man from outside the Christian community who recognizes God has been at work here. Instead of the end, the guard finds a new beginning to life that includes his whole family.

Justice and freedom are brought to people at opposite ends of the spectrum of life. "The girl was released from bondage to those who exploited her gifts. The jailer, who was ready to end his own life because of a job-related failure (brought on by an act of God) is spared dishonor and shame. The dangers of the first part of the account—[violence and imprisonment]—are reversed, and instead we find freedom, hospitality, and faith. (Landers, adapted)

Of course we know from history, Christians working in unity for justice and liberation do not always enjoy such a reprieve as Paul and Silas had that night. "Being God's servants does not mean escape from the dangerous places, but means the opportunity to be the voice and the hands of Christ there." (Peterson) Missionaries and vowed religious men and women have been jailed and worse for their work around the world. What comes to

my mind are the many working in Latin America who have lost their lives simply being the voice and hands of Christ – in Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador. . . We have only to think of Dr. Martin King to realize that even here in America it is dangerous to work for justice and freedom.

We probably do not consider ourselves as prophets for freedom like Dr. King, or preachers of justice like Paul and Silas. Yet, we can be that voice, those hands, of Christ in even the smallest of ways in this world. One act of support; a conversation with someone in crisis; a presence with someone feeling very alone; even writing a letter of concern to our government representatives – these are all ways in which we, too, “may all be one” in carrying out Jesus’ work in the world. It doesn’t have to be all that dangerous, but as Christians that is the risk we take if we do not want to be held captive to whatever would hold us down.

Just remember how the next day dawned for Paul and Silas. “. . . as it turned out it was not the apostles who had been prisoners that night, it had been [the] jailer. That's why the story concludes with a wonderful irony in verse 36. While they are all gathered around the jailer's kitchen table munching on bagels and gravlax for breakfast the next morning a telegram arrives from Chamber of Commerce. It says the jailer can release Paul and Silas. But everyone knows that not only are Paul and Silas already free, they had been free all along!” (Hoezee)

Let us embrace our freedom in Christ, and live dangerously!

Richard M. Landers, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, p. 527

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