

“Rocking the Jailhouse”  
Acts 16:16-34

Whenever we watch a movie, read a book, or listen to a story, we are often drawn to side with one of the characters. I remember when I was a kid always feeling happy whenever Jerry, the little mouse, won over Tom, the big cat. *Tom & Jerry's* cartoon is just one of the many examples that show how we have this tendency to be narrow in our perspective when it comes to deciding who is right and who is wrong; who is worthy of sympathy and who is not. At first blush, today's Bible story invokes in us this basic instinct. As we read the story of Paul and Silas, we are often drawn to side with them against those who put them in jail. After all, Paul and Silas were innocent and did not deserve to be punished for helping the slave girl get rid of a problem she had. This is how we tend to look at all problems in life. If I am right, then you are wrong and vice versa. This is what is called a dualistic worldview. Yet deeper truth, the truth of God's love can help us see things from different perspectives. Today I would like us to enter into our Bible story from Acts 16 to see it from the different perspectives of the people represented in it.

We will start with the people who are normally seen as the “good guys.” First, let's take a look at the slave girl. I would like you to put yourself in her position. You didn't choose to be a slave. You were sold into slavery because your parents had a bad year in farming the land and they lost everything including their own children. You are a victim of bad weather, an economic system that was oppressive and people never remembering to practice what God called them to do. You were seen as a possession living only to fulfill the needs of others. What made it worse for you is that you had a special gift of being able to see into the spirit world. This gift was misused by your owners. They saw it as a source of money. They took you to the market every day to tell fortunes and to sell your talent. This all came to an end when Paul and Silas prayed for you one day in the market and you lost your ability to foresee the future. It was a curse for your owners, but it was such great news for you because you didn't have to be put on public display every day anymore. You also did not have to work such long hours every day only to benefit someone else. Peace finally came into your life and mind.

The second perspective to get into is that of Paul's and Silas's. Now, I invite you to assume their position. You are a follower of Christ and you felt a call to go on a mission to tell others about life in Christ and continue the mission of spreading love, justice and peace throughout the world. You knew in your heart that the world needed this message of love. The world around you was dominated by greed and injustice. You saw that the way of the empire under which you were living was a way that abused people and seduced them into violence and greed. As you heard the message of Christ from others, you knew that it was a message of hope for the whole world that needed to be shared with all. But you also knew that this message was dangerous because it was seen as a threat to the power systems of the Roman Empire. When you felt the call to go to Philippi, you knew that you would be taking some major risks that might even endanger your life. But the power of Christ in your heart was too powerful to resist. Even though you ended up in prison after exorcising the poor slave girl in Philippi, you knew that you were doing the right thing. Even though you lost your freedom, your inner freedom was never taken away from you because you knew that the power of Christ was that of resistance and renewal to all that oppressed life. Even though you had the opportunity to escape prison when the earthquake came while you were in jail, you never stopped caring about people. You even cared about the jailer who was supposed to represent for you the worst of imperial power. Your life was brimming with the power of love. You have been freed to love even those who are supposedly

your enemies. Indeed the love of Christ has set you free to see human worth in every person you meet from the slave girl to the jailer in a foreign prison.

A third perspective to consider is that of the jailer. I invite you to put yourself in his place. You are a jailer. You have an important job. You work for the Empire that rules the world. Many people revere you and you have been trained for this important task. It is not fun to watch people in jail, but someone has to do it. It is one of those jobs that is important to the safety of others. In the ideal world, we wouldn't have any criminals, but in the real world, we have criminals and we have to protect those who are innocent. Plus, you don't really have a choice of who gets to go into prison or who doesn't. You just do what you are told. But with all of this, you still find yourself struggling when you see the cruelty and inequality of the system. When someone rich breaks the law, they get a different treatment. When a Roman citizen breaks the law, they are protected from the abuses of the system. But when someone who is not a citizen is accused of a crime, they get no protection and their rights are violated. You struggle with this sometimes, but you feel helpless. What can one person do to change a whole system?

The fourth and last perspective to explore in this story is that of magistrates. I invite you to walk in their shoes for a few moments. You are the ones assigned by the government to uphold the law of the land. You are entrusted with the task of making sure that your region has law and order. You have the case of Paul and Silas coming before you. You know some of the history of the followers of Christ. They have been causing trouble in other areas. They want the law of the land to be the law of love and justice for all. But that is not how the Roman Empire works. You know that there are rules to be followed. Slavery is legal in your time and place. Everyone around you believes that. Slave owners have the right to do whatever they want with their slaves. They are legally their property. Clearly Paul and Silas overstepped their authority. Who do they think they are to meddle with someone else's property? They had no right to take away the talent that the slave girl which cost her owners a great deal of money. In addition to that, you had no idea that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. You thought they did not have the right for a regular trial. You wonder what to do the next time this kind of thing comes up. Is justice about upholding the laws of the land or about treating people with dignity and compassion? Why do these things have to be sometimes at such opposite ends?

Now, you can go back to being outsiders or just listeners to this story. We can see that this story is about liberation on so many levels. We can identify with the dilemmas of each of the characters and the lines between good and bad are not so neatly drawn. First, the girl is liberated from being used as a possession. Second, the system of Roman oppression and greed is confronted. Third, Paul and Silas experience liberation in prison. Fourth, the jailer experiences liberation from being an agent of oppression to being an advocate for life and liberty. This is the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message of Christ is about liberating us from all that holds us back from loving God and our neighbors. Yet, the grace of Christ cannot be reduced to one side or the other. It is grace that can bring healing to all both victims and perpetrators because this grace rises above the simple divisions of right and wrong to seeing the deeper needs in each of our hearts and in each of life's situations.

Our world is filled with a variety of injustices and we are all affected. More than 25 million people around the world today live in slavery. Some examples of our modern day slavery are: Members of a Zambian boys choir who were forced to sing to earn their traffickers a profit and were withheld from obtaining the education they were promised; hearing-impaired Mexicans who were forced to peddle items on the streets of New York to earn money for their traffickers; South Asian women forced to work in a factory without pay and with constant physical and

sexual violence against them; and young American girls forced to prostitute themselves on the streets while under constant physical and sexual violence from pimps and those purchasing sex. There are also examples from our own lives where we are imprisoned by the pain others have inflicted on us or by the pain we have inflicted on others. That is why we need the grace of God to help us to transform our pain so that liberation is experienced in our lives and in our world. Most of us live in our one jailhouse or another. This does not only apply to the “good guys.” It applies to all of us. All of us are in need of the liberation of Christ so that greed and violence can be transformed into compassion and love. In his book, *Tatoos on the Heart; the Power of Boundless Compassion*, Father Greg Boyle tells the story of a kid named Betito, a precocious, funny, bold 12-year old from Aliso Village in East L.A. Father Greg called him one of the kids who would drop by Dolores Mission Church. “They’d just sit on the couch in the waiting area or play video games on the computers. They were dry emaciated sponges hoping to catch just one drop of adult attention. All of the staff got into the habit of asking each kid, daily, ‘So, what did you learn today that you never knew before?’ Betito was one of those special kids who always had something to say that he had learned in school. “Today I learned about da buffalo.” Today I learned about fractions.” He always wanted to converse only in English to improve his English since Spanish was the only language spoken in his home. He always wanted to be with adults to compensate for the absence of adult supervision and affection in his life. One Sunday evening Betito was playing with his cousin, a van pulled into his housing project, opened fire and Betito was killed – age twelve. Father Greg writes in his book about his own learning that being in the world the way Jesus was is the only way that works anywhere but especially with kids who are trying to become free of a system based on exclusion and violence. He writes, “If we long to be in the world who God is in the world, then, somehow our compassion has to find its way to spaciousness, to vastness. When the guys in the van who killed Betito were caught... it was excruciating not to be able to hate them. They were sheep without a shepherd. And they were no less the real deal [than Betito]. It’s just that they lack someone to reveal the truth to them. The truth about how beloved they were. They had evaded healing and the task of returning to themselves and that traumatic cycle got more hardened and difficult the older they became. But then I had to ask myself, are they any less worthy of compassion than Betito?” God is always rocking the jailhouses of our world, are we ready for this kind of freedom to love? Amen.