

IDENTITY
Sermon for June 2, 2019
Acts 16: 16-34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 21-22
John 17: 20-26

The story from Acts that we read this morning is worth going over again because it is a little bit complicated and because it shows Paul, whom I'll discuss in a moment, as he is at the beginning of his western journeys. Paul and his pal, Siias, are in Phiiippi in Macedonia, and they have been on tour, spreading the word. They are probably a bit known by now. A slave girl, who is used by her owners to tell fortunes and thus make money for them, has been following them and calling them out as the proselytizers that they are. Paul summons the spirit from her so that she no longer names them, or, looked at another way, he tells her to stop doing what her masters want her to do. In either case, her masters cannot make money from her any longer and they seize Paul and Silas drag them to the authorities for being Jews who are teaching unlawful customs to Romans. And they get thrown in jail and beaten pretty badly. But Paul and Silas don't succumb to their situation; rather they start singing and raising prayers to the Lord, and of course, all the other prisoners hear them. Then an earthquake occurs, something that seems to have happened conveniently in many Biblical stories, and all the gates and the chains came unlocked. But the jailor now is terrified because if all the prisoners flee, he is in jeopardy for his job and maybe his life and he takes his sword and is about to kill himself. Then he hears Paul, who instead of fleeing like any upstanding prisoner, has remained to save the jailor. "No, no, we are still here," calls Paul. So the jailor is saved and is baptized and blessed along with his whole family who provide hospitality to Paul and Silas.

Then, after this, Paul lambastes the officers and the magistrates. Paul is a Roman and they have behaved illegally toward him, and Paul lets them have it, finally leaving the area to move on to further adventures.

I thought that before we turned to the lessons that might be emitted from this story, we could talk a little bit about Paul. We read Paul's writings all the time but I, at least, don't have a sense for him. I found a wonderful discussion of him by Frederick Buechner and it seems relevant to share a bit of it.

“He wasn't much to look at. ‘Bald headed, bowlegged, strongly built, a man small in size with meeting eyebrows, with a rather large nose.’ So he is described in ‘The Acts of Paul and Thecla.

‘Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one,’ he wrote. ‘Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked. A night and a day I have been adrift at sea. In danger from rivers... robbers... my own people... cold and exposure.’ He was also sick off and on all his life. The wonder of it was that he was able to get around at all. But get around he did. Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Galatia, Colossae, not to mention side trips to Jerusalem, Cyprus, Crete, Malta, Athens, Syracuse, Rome - there was hardly a whistle stop in the Mediterranean world that he didn't make it to eventually, and sightseeing was the least of it. He planted churches the way Johnny Appleseed planted trees. And whenever he had ten minutes to spare he wrote letters. He bullied. He coaxed. He comforted. He cursed. He bared his soul. He reminisced. He complained. He theologized. He inspired. He exulted. Punch-drunk and Christ-drunk, he kept in touch with everybody. The postage alone must have cost him a fortune, not counting the energy and time. And where did it all start? On the road, as you might expect. He was still in charge of a Pharisee goon squad in those days and was hell-bent for Damascus to round up

some troublemaking Christians and bring them to justice. And then it happened. It was about noon when he was knocked flat by a blaze of light that made the sun look like a 40 watt bulb, and out of the light came a voice that called him by his Hebrew name twice. 'Saul,' it said, and then again 'Saul. Why are you out to get me?' and when he pulled himself together enough to ask who it was he had the honor of addressing, what he heard to his horror was, 'I'm Jesus of Nazareth, the one you're out to get. Those boys in Damascus', Jesus said, 'Don't fight them. Join them. I want you on my side,' and Paul never in his life forgot the sheer lunatic joy and astonishment of that moment. He was blind as a bat for three days afterward, but he made it to Damascus anyway and was baptized on the spot. He was never the same again, and neither, in a way, was the world."

Paul's identity changed when he got hit by that blaze of light and the optics, as they say now, that surrounded him became different. He was no longer out to punish people and correct their behavior, but to save them and love them. Yet, though he was not the same again, as Buechner says, in a way, of course, he was the same person. He looked the same, was born the same, even traveled around in the same way. Perhaps we would say now that his focus was different.

The story that we read today from Acts is all about that issue of identity, about how a person is perceived and understood differently when a few characteristics change. The slave girl without her fortune telling spirit becomes a victim rather than a weapon or a profit making tool. Paul and Silas are trouble makers and rabble rousers when they are identified as Jews; yet the tables turn when it becomes known that they are Romans and they have the power over the magistrates and officers who have done them wrong. They are prisoners, Paul and Silas, beaten and broken, yet they are spirit uplifters because they sing and pray so that the others in the prison can hear and be affected. They are victims also when

they are tortured and imprisoned, yet, when the earthquake occurs and the doors and chains are released they are the ones who have power over the jailor, and the jailor becomes the supplicant. Paul is now the one who can save the jailor, rather than the other way around.

A short joke that probably many of you have heard expresses the consequences of identity: It's about a grasshopper. A grasshopper walks into a bar and says to the bartender, "May I sit down?" The bartender responds, "Of course, we even have a drink named after you." The grasshopper says, "Really, you have a drink named Irving?"

The effects of identity are individualized and powerful and wonderfully expressed in the story of Paul's transformation from a bringer of punishment to one of love and freedom - and that is so both in the road to Damascus story but also when he becomes quickly the releaser of the jailor rather than his victim.

The capacity of Identity to transform an individual's role in a relationship from oppressor to supplicant, from fear producing to love producing is enormous.

And so, this seems to be an understanding that we can all take for ourselves and for others - we can be so much more than our given descriptors.

Paul's ability to move beyond his identity as a prisoner who might be expected to escape to one that remains in order to sustain his own jailor, that identity is transformative for the jailor but also for us.

We too have the ability to move beyond the identities of our heritage, employment, economic situation, and culture. And by our attention and service and outward turning gaze, we can help others do the same. No one needs to remain a slave girl, an outcast, a prisoner or a jailor. All of these identities have opportunities for change and amplification. We are free to offer love and to find it in all its various guises. So let us take advantage of that.

Remember that it is the 50th anniversary of Woodstock this year - so love and peace are in the air.

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