

## **There is Freedom, and Then There is Freedom. Are You and I Really Free?**

Sunday, May 29, 2022

### I

Well there's been a lot of press about free choice lately. I remember when they threw up concrete barriers around the White House a few years ago, and right away I remember thinking, "Hey, I'm not free to drive down Pennsylvania Avenue anymore." And of course now, among other freedom issues, "Hey! I don't have to take the Covid vaccine if I don't want to." I mean, this is a free country, right?

I mean we've got freedom of speech, freedom of religion – or freedom FROM religion if we want. Academic freedom is the crown jewel of the university system – freedom to think, to teach, to publish as the spirit moves us! But let's stand back a minute and think here. What about our own freedom? Are we really free? Surrounded by our security systems, and our fears – fears of a heart attack, sudden stroke, fear of dementia, fear of insolvency. So. Are we free?

Well, I guess there's freedom ... and then there's freedom. We've built a society that gives awesome freedom to its citizens. I mean, we can all pack guns, I guess – if we want to. In fact, we live in a supermarket of desire. I've got maximum space to grab what I want – as long as I don't bump into you while you're gettin' yours. My dad used to joke: "I got mine. How you doin'?" I got mine. ...

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Well OK. You and I have freedom of choice ... but now what? Yes, we're free ... but we're also unbearably lonely at times, and terribly driven. The nine to five ... or six, or seven, or eight job, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed kids, dog-eat-dog fight for grades and promotions – this is our freedom? Well I guess there's freedom and there's freedom; true freedom and slavery ... masked as freedom. And the sad, sad fact is that you and I might not always know the difference.

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The reading from Acts this morning tells a story about folks in Philippi in bondage and folks who're free. Who in this story is really free? Let's look.

### II

So Paul and Silas were on their way to a place of prayer and were accosted by this fortune-telling slave girl. I guess she made money for her owners who probably rented her out to read palms and provide amusement as a sideshow. She was, uh, we'd say mentally unbalanced. So she took to dogging Paul and Silas, making a nuisance of

herself, shouting at them, shouting about them to all who'd listen: "These men are slaves of the All High God!"

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Now here's a picture of enslavement if there ever was one. A slave girl, in the grips of mental illness, with some "demon" holding her in bondage. So finally Paul, "very much annoyed," has had enough of the girl's raving and, in the name of Christ, cures her ... and sets her free ... frees her from this demonic bondage.

Now see, here's a young girl, chained her whole life to the hell of demon possession, and now she's free: You'd think there'd be dancin' in the street! But no. Her owners aren't free enough for that. 'Cause they're slaves to their own greed. I mean, it was fine for her owners to occasionally give a dollar to the local Mental Health drive. But this is another matter! Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with cold cash here, and so her owners react as vested interests always react when their profits or their power are threatened.

So they drag Paul and Silas before the authorities and insist that "we're not against a little religion – as long as it's kept in its place. But these men are Jews and they're disturbing our city. They promote customs that aren't lawful for us Romans to practice."

See, they don't come right out and say that their self-interest is threatened. No, they say "our nation is threatened. These missionaries are foreigners. And they are Jews! And we all know what they're like – money grabbin', materialistic." And if the nationalism and the anti-Semitism don't work, we'll throw in an appeal to old-time religion: "They push customs not lawful for us to practice." So nation, race, tradition – all stepping into line behind the almighty dollar.

In other words, the owners easily could have put up with Paul and Silas' sermons if all they'd done was preach. It's only when the source of their money machine is dried up in the name of Jesus Christ that hostility erupts. I mean, preachin's fine; meddlin' in our purse is another matter.

As an aside, this story reminds me also of the pig story in the Gospels. Do you remember how Jesus ordered the demon out of a poor bedeviled soul and into a herd of swine? And the pigs all rushed headlong over a cliff? Remember that? No thanks to Jesus for healing the demoniac. Just a quick escort out of town. I mean, thanks, but no thanks. Look what you did to our herd! The profit motive and the Gospel motive collide! And I think that's just what we can grasp in this morning's reading. We've got democracy in action here, with the whole town – or at least a voting majority – fallin' into line in the marketplace, attacking and beating Paul and Silas. And those liberators who set the slave girl free are now bound! Hauled off to jail! Shackled and locked up!

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And then you know what happens? Around about midnight, Paul and Silas are prayin' and singin' hymns to God, and I bet the other prisoners sit wide-eyed, watchin' 'em – singing, praying, having a sort of religious rally in jail.

And then the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open, and everyone's chains drop off. And in that commotion, the jailer wakes with a start! And when he spots the doors wide open, he's horrified. Knowing what happens to disgraced jailers who let their prisoners escape, he draws his sword and prepares to do the noble thing and kill himself. Obviously, having the key to someone else's cell doesn't make you free either!

So Paul shouts, "Don't do it. We're all here, just singin'!" I imagine that the jailer gasps, "But you were bound in chains, and now you're free to escape!" But Paul insists: "No, we prisoners are free ... and you, sir, are now chained. But look here – I can free you also to escape!" And then the jailer cries out, "What do I have to do to be saved? What do I have to do ... to be free? Like you?" And so ... he's baptized. Along with his whole family. Right then and there.

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OK. Let's think. Where is freedom here? 'Cause by the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free – the girl's owners, the judge, the jailer ... really turn out to be slaves. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Paul, and Silas, and now even that jailer – are really free!

### III

Well two things: First, the Gospel cannot be bound or shackled – in Philippi; in Moscow; in Ukraine; in Minnesota; in Richmond, Virginia. Second, it looks like you and I don't have to go huntin' for opportunities to spread Christ's word. 'Cause those opportunities come to us. They erupt all around us.

And that's exactly what happens in Philippi. In fact, Paul rounds a corner – bumps into a demon! Proclamation erupts! Paul and Silas hunker down in a dank cell! A tent revival bursts forth! An earthquake rattles chains! And a jailer and his kin are liberated!

Each occasion for witness to God's freedom was unplanned, spontaneous, even accidental unless, of course, you see, as Luke who wrote Acts surely did, unless you see that just such happy happenstance enables God's visitation – opening up real freedom in and by His Spirit.

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See finally – from our culture’s point of view – as long as Christians stay “on their reservation” and deal exclusively with the “things of God,” and keep out of the way, otherwise, then all’s well. But when Christ confronts the culture’s cash cows, when we go from preachin’ to meddlin’, when we go from dreamin’ to doin’, when we actually set the captives free ... all hell breaks loose!

Someone once wrote “we have to choose, you and I, between suicide and salvation.” And that choice is at work here in the dark recesses of that Philippian jail. That jailer falls on his knees and, with a life-shattering intensity, begs Paul and Silas, “What must I do? To be free?”

The question’s more than academic. It’s the question each of us, at some point in our lives, has to face. “How’m I going to get out of this? How’m I going to be rescued? How’m I going to be healed? How’m I going to find what I most deeply want? How can I really ... be free?”

Paul says: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you’ll be saved, you and your household.” And with that, the jailer moves from suicide to salvation, from false freedom ... to the real thing. And that choice shows the Risen Christ’s power to save from slavery – even ... you and me.

There’s freedom ... and there’s real freedom. Help us Lord ... to know the difference.

Amen.