

Freedom

Acts 2:1-4 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 16:16-30 One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. ¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

Freedom

Back in the early 1990s, Will Willimon was the preacher at Duke Chapel. Just before Memorial Day, he preached a sermon on freedom, which is just as relevant today as it was twenty years ago. And so, this morning I am borrowing heavily from his remarks at that time.

He told about a man he knew in New York who said, "One thing I like about living in New York is the freedom. Here, there is freedom to live the lifestyle I choose – to eat where I want and to dress as I like. Freedom." Then he closed the door. He locked the latch, turned the deadbolt, inserted the chain, and switched on the electronic alarm, telling Will, "Don't dare open that door without switching off the alarm because all hell will break loose and the cops might shoot you dead."

If there is one virtue that we can all agree on this morning, it is freedom. We Americans may disagree on taxes, national defense, policy in the Middle East, and whether the crust is better at Pizza Hut or Papa John's, but we all agree that freedom is good. Freedom of religion. Freedom of choice.

Freedom? Surrounded by our burglar alarms and medicine cabinets and our fears – fear of heart attack, impotency, Alzheimer's, and identity theft – this is freedom?

We Americans have built a society that has given an unprecedented material freedom to its citizens. I am given maximum space to pursue aggressively what I want, as long as I don't bump into you while you are getting yours. What we call culture is really a vast supermarket of desire, envy, and greed. I've got freedom of choice, but now what do I choose? We are free, but we are also terribly lonely, terribly driven. The 9 to 5 job, or multiple jobs, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed kids, and a dog-eat-dog contest for grades in school – this is our freedom.

You see there is freedom, and then there is freedom. And our problem, in this matter of freedom, is that we may not even know what true freedom is. We can feel like we're in some sort of bondage when gasoline approaches four dollars a gallon. Now that it's dropped some I feel less bound. But the

big difference is that I've felt a lot less bound by gas prices when I recently found out that gas in England and Scotland is running nine to ten dollars a gallon. At about the same time I learned that the military budget of the United States is more than the combined military budgets of China, Russia, Britain, France, Japan, and ten more countries. Our military spending is more than the next fifteen countries combined! That extraordinary difference makes me pause and wonder about many things, including about the freedom and the bondage that kind of spending creates.

Today's lesson from Acts tells stories about people who were in bondage and people who were free. Think about the story we just heard.

Paul and Silas were going to church one day and were accosted by a slave girl. Because this girl could tell people's fortunes, her owners made lots of money hiring her out to read palms and provide entertainment at business conventions. She was possessed by a demon (mentally unbalanced, we would say). She took to following Paul and Silas around, shouting at them, saying things about them.

Here is a picture of enslavement. If you've suffered through the torment of mental illness, if someone whom you love is in the grip of schizophrenia or terrible depression, or trapped in the ever shrinking world of Alzheimer's, then you can tell us about bondage. It's as if something has you, something you can't shake, some dark, uncontrollable force which you're powerless to hold back.

Paul has enough of the young woman's raving and, in the name of Christ, cures her. Thank God, she is free! But no, she isn't free, because she's a slave, someone who isn't a person but a piece of property, owned by somebody else. And some of you, back in your own family trees, had great-great-grandparents who were bought and sold. A slave. Can there be a more vivid image of human bondage?

Luke says, "When her owners saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers." "Let's hear it for the business community!" On another occasion Jesus healed a mentally deranged man by casting his demons into some swine (Luke 8:33). For this act of charity, Jesus was promptly escorted out of town by the local Pork Dealers Association. Later on, at a place called Ephesus, Paul had a big revival and many were converted and it was all wonderful – except for the members of Local 184 of the International Brotherhood of Silver Idol Craftsmen. They didn't like it at all.

Here is a young woman, chained her whole life to the hell of mental illness, and she is free. There ought to be rejoicing. But no, her owners aren't free to do that. It was fine to give a dollar to the Mental Health Association drive last fall, but this is another matter. Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so her owners do what the vested ones always do when their interests are threatened. Oh, we don't come right out and say that God is interfering with our business. We're not so dumb. No, we hire a public – relations firm that teaches us how to talk in front of a camera and how to answer reporters and put a good face on the Corporation. The girl's owners say, "Judge, we're not against a little religion, as long as it's kept in its place. But these Jews are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it isn't lawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

No, we don't come right out and say that our financial self-interest is threatened; we say that our nation is threatened. "These missionaries are foreigners." Buy American! Besides, they're Jews. And we all know what they're like. And if the nationalism and the anti-Semitism don't work, we'll throw in an appeal for old time religion, saying "They advocate customs that aren't lawful for us to practice." Nation, race, tradition – all stepping into line behind the dollar

Then the crowd fell into line behind the town's business leaders. They attacked and beat Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas are put into the back cell of the town prison, and the jailer locked them in the stocks. The liberators have become the imprisoned. Jesus has helped set a pitiful young woman free, but two of Jesus' people get jailed in the process.

The one who came preaching, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," well, you know where he ended up. So it looks like Paul and Silas will end up rotting away in prison. But the story says "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners

were listening to them . . . " Wait, these man in chains, legs locked in the stocks, are singing, praying, having some kind of a rally, there, in jail?

Willimon tells about meeting with a Methodist Bishop from Angola not too long after a Marxist government came into power. He wanted to know what that was like for the church. The Bishop said, "The government does what it needs to do. The church does what it needs to do. And if we go to jail for being the church, we shall go to jail. Jail is a wonderful place for Christian evangelism. Our church made some of the most dramatic gains during the revolution, when so many of us were in jail. In jail you can have everyone there, in one place. You have time to preach and teach. Yes, twenty of our Methodist pastors were killed during the revolution, but we came out of jail a much larger and stronger church. Don't worry about the church in Angola; God is doing fine by us. Frankly, I would find it much more difficult to be a pastor in the United States. Here, there is so much, so many things, it must be hard to be the church here. "Think about that. This Bishop from a country with a repressive Marxist government thinks that our bounty restricts the church more than their repression.

Back to the story in Acts --The earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open, and everyone's chains fall off. The jailer wakes up and is horrified when he sees that the doors are open. 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. Just having the key to someone else's cell doesn't make you free; iron bars do not make a prison.

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 freed to stay and you, our jailer, are chained to your sword, but now you can be free to escape." And the jailer asked, "What do I have to do to be saved from my bondage? What do I have to do to be free?" And he was baptized.

What is freedom? By the end of Luke's story, everyone who at first appeared to be free – the girl's owners, the judge, the jailer – are shown to be slaves. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Paul, and Silas – are free. Jesus does things like that to people. Who pulls your strings? In what ways are you in bondage? In what ways are you free?

There is freedom and then there is freedom. Earlier, Jesus has said, "If you continue in my word you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free. (John 8:31 – 32) Who do we serve? Do we serve the advertising industry? Do we serve the illusive dream of having close personal relationships because we have the latest smart phone? Do we serve the military industrial complex that Dwight Eisenhower warned us about over fifty years ago?

Or do we serve our Lord and our neighbor? Do we serve the veterans that have given years of their lives, parts of their bodies, and chunks of their mental capacity in answering the call that this country placed upon them? We are called to love our neighbor and so many of our neighbors need our love, need respect, need to be recognized for the service they have given. History will make it clear about the level of wisdom in our wars and their strategies and tactics. That's a separate question. For now, we know that serving God and neighbor will give us true freedom, freedom that cannot be taken from us. Amen.