

“Shaken and Unchained”

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Acts 16:16-34

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I had my first experience with the prison system when I was a freshman in college in Seattle. I volunteered at the King County Juvenile Detention Center. Naively, it hadn't really occurred to me that “Detention Center” really meant a jail. I was assigned to the 12- to 15-year-old boys' unit. I can't describe adequately how shocked I was the first time I walked through a set of bolted doors and then again at every turn in the sterile hallways.

The boys were in cramped, barred cells. Some were alone depending upon what he was in for. There were boys as young as 10 years old because the justice system did not know what else to do with these children who were already exhibiting dangerous behaviors. Some boys were in for petty theft. Tennis shoes were a popular item to steal. One 14 year-old was in for abusing his younger siblings; one 12 year old for aggravated assault.

It was eerie knowing a boy's criminal record because when I looked in his eyes, he was just a child. Admittedly, some boys were already so hardened, it was disturbing. But when the boys were out on the basketball court or playing a game of checkers with me, they were just kids. When we ate dinner together, they complained about the food, cracked jokes, told stories about their friends at home, and made each other laugh—just as kids do.

I would take the bus back to my beautiful college campus, and bring home with me an agonizing question: What emotional pain imprisoned those boys long before they were behind actual bars?

My experience with those young prisoners helped me understand why Jesus mandated us to visit the prisoner, to set the captive free.

This morning's story is about captivity and freedom. It's about the shaking of the foundation of one's life, and how those cracks and fissures can transform us.

I'm focusing on three characters, or character groups, in the story: The slave girl, her owners, and the jailor. Each was enslaved in their own ways, and in great need of freedom.

First, the slave girl.

Who was she? She was unnamed, called a diviner--someone possessed by a spirit that could tell people's fortunes. Her “gift” made her a small, profitable business for her owners. Like far too many children around the world forced to work in factories

or to sell themselves, the slave girl 2000 years ago was also the object of her abusive owners.

As Paul and his friends were on their way to pray each day, the girl followed them through the streets, and the spirit would shout: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation!" That was true. Isn't it interesting that the slave girl called Paul and Silas "slaves of God?" just as she was a slave?

Paul, finally so annoyed by the spirit's shouting, turned and demanded the spirit come out of her. He did not tell her to shut up, but spoke to the spirit directly. In the name of Jesus Christ, she was unchained and set free from the spirit that confined her.

What happened to the girl after she was set free of her demon and no longer economically viable? We don't know. The silence in the story allows us to use our imaginations.

In the lovely film, *Chocolat*, the protagonist named Vianne and her young daughter move to a small French village to open a chocolate shop. Vianne befriends an abused, young wife, Josephine, who is tormented by a mental affliction. Through Vianne's friendship and love, the young woman begins to heal. Josephine discovers she not only has a gift for creating exquisite chocolate confections, she possesses more courage than she knows. Josephine's body, mind and heart are set free through the loving kindness of Vianne.

At the beginning of Acts 16, a wealthy woman named Lydia converted to the way of Christ. Lydia became one of the leaders of Paul's growing church in Philippi. I like to imagine that Lydia took in that slave girl. I like to imagine Lydia treated the girl with kindness and gave her work that was dignifying and humane. That the girl was taken in by a group of older, wise women that went down to the river to pray each day. I like to imagine that the girl lived the remainder of her life liberated from her past.

The second group of enslaved characters in our story was the slave girl's owners.

Who were they? They were investors in and shareholders of the girl. Their lucrative income stream had been cut off by Paul's healing of her. The men who controlled the city were imprisoned by their own greed and avarice. They dragged Paul and Silas into the town square, and gathered the civic leaders in order that all understood the *economic impact* that Paul's message (and his freeing of the girl) was having on the city's way of life.

A friend of mine often says,
"The gospel must afflict the comfortable,
and comfort the afflicted." Paul's message clearly afflicted the slave owners.

When our religious convictions move us beyond bland concern into authentic action, those in power take notice. When we move from sending a few dollars to *the charity of our choice* to confronting *unjust systems of oppression*, those in power sit up. When economic boycotting dries up income streams, the marketplace does not show compassion.

We would be deaf readers of this story if we did not hear the hard questions it asks of us: How many nameless young girls and boys in the world are treated as commodities? Children are caught in the sex slave industry; child laborers work in sweat shops; child soldiers fight grown men's wars.

Like all abused children, this slave girl was at the mercy of others to set her free. Like Paul, we are to be instruments of God's liberation for the most vulnerable. "For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others," said Nelson Mandela. This story should afflict us.

Finally, the jailer in charge of Paul and Silas was shackled in his own way.

Who was he? He was a slave to the Roman penal system. The jailer was a company guy, obedient to the responsibilities given him. He dutifully responded to the orders of his superiors, perhaps against his own conscience. After Paul and Silas were severely beaten, the jailer threw them into the innermost cell and shackled their feet.

While the jailer was sleeping on the job, I imagine Paul and Silas singing out the words of Psalm 97—

- 1 The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!
- 2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
- 3 righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- 4 His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles.
- 5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of all the earth.

An earthquake so violent shook the foundation of the prison, the doors flung open, and the prisoners' chains fell to the floor.

Terrified, the jailer was ready to fall on his sword when Paul called out these reassuring words: "Do not harm yourself; we are all here."
Do not be afraid. The Presence of God is here.

The jailer responded by asking THE critical question—the game changer:
"What must I do to be set free?"

Freedom begins when we say, Help Me. (Buechner)

Each of us has our own prisons we've built. Prisons that need to be shaken.
Each of us has had --or will have—the foundation of our lives shaken in some way,

at some point. "I'm leaving you." "You have cancer." "We're downsizing the company." There are moments that feel like tectonic plates have shifted.

What version of your own prison are you living in? It might be as simple-- and as difficult ---as keeping your family's frenetic pace! Feeling imprisoned by your child's soccer schedule, shuttling kids from game to game in your SUV. From what do you need to be set free? When do you say, "Enough is enough?"

Writer Anne Lamott tells about her own conversion to Christianity like this: "Jesus followed me at my heels like a stray cat. And I knew if I cracked open the door and gave him milk once, he would never leave." She finally conceded. "Fine. Come in," she said. Once in, Jesus would not leave her shackled to her addictions. (Traveling Mercies, Lamott) Just as she dreaded, she was never the same.

Emancipation can be frightening and hard. It takes courage to be unchained from what binds us. The nameless slave girl and jailer encountered Paul's Jesus, and their lives were never the same--The jailer's acceptance of the radical freedom offered in Jesus Christ shook the very ground of his and his family's life --for they were all baptized that night.

We do not have to be overcome by fear; we are not alone.
Trust this is the good news.