

Networking  
May 8, 2016  
Mary R. Brownlow

In my earlier ministry as a hospice chaplain, and as local church pastor, I am often asked to pray during a pastoral visit. Which I am happy to do. Occasionally, the parishioner or the patient returns the favor, and speaks their own words of prayer, of intercession. There is something very humbling and moving about being prayed for – about hearing oneself being prayed for. And that exactly what we just heard in our Gospel reading. Jesus was praying for us: for “those who believe in him through the words of the disciples.” In rather circular language, Jesus was praying for unity, for the kind of mutual relationship of love that existed between himself and God. He was praying that this unity would become an integral part of his followers’ identity.

We might well ask, “How has this shown up for us in the last 2000 years?” with the obvious answer: “not very well.” The Christian church has been and continues to be famously divided, in spite of calls for unity and ecumenism. We would do well to examine the pitfalls of dis-unity, or perhaps, the illusion of independence.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote: “In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men (and women) are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...”

Today, our reading from the book of Acts gives us a couple of illustrations of the network of mutuality. I think that they bring up questions of our relationship to authority, of the ways we exercise freedom, and of how we understand our responsibility to others.

Paul and Silas are on a journey, a missionary journey to Macedonia and Greece. They have been warmly received in the Roman colony of Philippi, and are given a place to stay by a wealthy woman named Lydia. Lydia and her whole household had been baptized after hearing the Gospel. This was a common practice: households were baptized, as though an individual conversion, especially of servants and slaves, was not necessary for baptism. Society had strata, and you tended to go along with those who were above you.

Paul and Silas continued their stay, but they began to be followed by a clairvoyant slave, who makes noisy pronouncements (but true pronouncements) about the way of salvation. In case you imagine an old gypsy fortune-telling crone, you should know that the Greek word used to describe her, *paidiskein*, literally means “little girl.” However, it could also be used of grown slave women in a fashion similar to the demeaning practice of calling a grown African American man “boy” during periods of American history. So we cannot know for certain whether she is a young girl or a grown woman. But, in either case, we know that the money she earns goes to her owners. They value her for her unusual ability to tell the future or discern the truth, which was seen as a spirit possession. The text says that she “had a spirit of divination” (*pneuma pythona*—literally “a spirit, a snake”). We don’t know her name. Probably she had a nickname like “Python Girl.” She is

a slave. Maybe a slave with the freedom to follow strangers around, even though they are not paying her, but she is not a free agent in any sense of the word.

Interestingly, she calls Paul and Silas slaves too. She says they are “slaves of the Most High God.” Was she trying to establish some kind of connection with them? “I am the slave of these unscrupulous showmen, but these are the slaves of a God who promises to save us.” We could even hear her words as a desperate cry for help, from one kind of slave to another.

Paul was annoyed - “very much annoyed” - by her behavior. He did not want this kind of free advertising from a snake spirit. Maybe he would rather not be called a slave: he was a Roman citizen, after all. So he performs a quick exorcism. Done. She is now just a plain old slave girl, of no particular value to her owners any more.

Does anyone else wonder about this? I mean, it is all very well to call out strange spirits and set a girl “free,” but does anyone else wonder what became of her? Our narrative leaves her behind, as though her sole purpose was to set up Paul and Silas for a confrontation with the authorities. Paul and Silas did not share the Gospel of salvation with her, they did not challenge the men who had used her affliction for gain. They just did their little miracle and went their way. This shows a lot about the society and the Empire in which they lived...and maybe about our ideas of how to “do good” as well. When the spirit leaves the slave girl, she becomes a depleted resource to her owners. Paul also overlooks her value as a person. She quickly disappears from the scene. No one cares what she thinks or what will befall her. So much for the inescapable network of mutuality. When I looked up what many commentators said about this girl, most wanted to imagine that she was converted and became part of the Christian community of Phillipi, perhaps in Lydia’s household. But there is absolutely no evidence of this in the text. Nada. The very fact that interpreters feel the need to imagine this is an indication of our discomfort with the treatment of the slave girl.

The story presents the world of the powerful and the powerless, the cruelty of an Empire. This exorcism is an economic offense: undercutting the economic power of the slaveholders. The slaveholders, in turn, call Paul’s action a disturbance of the peace. We hear classic religious and ethnic scapegoating, as they enlist popular resentment by saying these “Jews” are promoting anti-Roman values. With a potent combination of mob violence and civil power, and perhaps “enhanced interrogation techniques,” Paul and Silas receive an instant sentence for their actions: they are stripped, beaten and thrown into prison. Now they really are shackled, powerless, and in pain, completely “unfree.” Ironically, this is the moment they show their faith, with prayer and singing and a striking example of confidence for their fellow prisoners. They rise to the occasion.

The Empire is powerful, but the Most High God intervenes – in the form of an earthquake. This is a miracle: a joyful one for the prisoners, but a death sentence for the jailer. The magistrates had specifically asked him to keep Paul and Silas safely locked up, and of course the prisoners were gone. But it runs out they the apostles had a more generous spirit: “Do not harm yourself, for we are still here.” Paul and Silas, stayed put when given the chance to leave. Now, there may have been some legal calculation in this, as when they later insist on the rights of Roman citizenship. But their choice to stay in custody seemed to have a deeper purpose. Not only did these two apostles see their mission in that Philippian prison as a means of bringing hope to prisoners, they also sought to bring hope and spiritual freedom to the jailer himself.

So, another miracle: the prisoners did not run away, and the awestruck jailer kneels before them, and calls them “masters” or “lords” and asks, “What must I do to be saved?” The tables keep turning, the jailer is caught in an impossible situation, the prisoners are free, but sacrifice their own liberation for the sake of the life of their enemy.

It is an interesting question the jailer asks, “What must I do to be saved?” Throughout the centuries, preachers have taken this to mean, “how can my soul be saved?” or “How can I find God?” But really the plain meaning of the story makes it pretty unlikely that the jailer was looking for a theory of the atonement, or a way to be justified by faith, or the ultimate destiny of his soul. He was in a desperate situation, right then and there, and he wants out. He might as well have said, “Masters, how am I going to get out of this situation alive? Help!”

The response from the apostles? “Believe (or trust) in the Lord Jesus,” and “they spoke the word of the Lord to him and all who were in his house.” Once again, I do not think that they were talking theology. I do not think that they were promising pie-in-the-sky heaven with pearly gates. I suspect that they were speaking about trust, about the prayers of Jesus, and the inescapable network of mutuality. I suspect that they echoed the words of their Rabbi Jesus: “The kingdom of God has drawn near.” A new ethic and a new culture is coming into the world, and you can be part of a new era, where chains are broken and wounds are washed and the hungry are fed and a whole household rejoices. Turns out that this was a pretty compelling message, and the trust the jailer puts in them and in this surprising God becomes visible, tangible, and powerful.

And yet...I can't stop thinking about that slave girl: the one who annoyed Paul so much. I understand that Paul and Silas may not have been able to purchase her freedom. But could they not offer her one word of encouragement, one gesture of solidarity, one message of hope? As expendable as she was to her owners – did she also have to suffer the neglect of these godly men? OK. I won't hold this permanently against Paul. But I want to learn a lesson from it. What is the missing piece of our mission?

Who are those we are happy and eager to free from oppression, from poverty, from despair? And who are those, like the little slave girl, who get lost in the shuffle when important men get into power struggles with each other. Who becomes collateral damage in the culture wars? Who falls through the holes in that network of mutuality?

This morning, at our 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Breakfast Connection in the Parish Hall, the subject of the refugee crisis came up. The situation in the Middle East is so horrific, and so enormous, that we get discouraged about a solution, or think of saving certain people. But one person mentioned our seeming blindness to the persecution of Christians in some countries, above and beyond the humanitarian disasters that all people suffer from. I was thinking that the one slave girl might be like the few Christians in Syria, for instance: easy to lose sight of when we look for what we can do.

Here, at the Norwich Congregational Church, we can pray for unity. We can pray, as we often do, for the oppressed, the refugee, the grieving, those addicted or lost. But we cannot truly exorcise the evils of our society without looking into the eyes of that young girl, newly freed from the Python, but still at the mercy of the human snakes of the world. We cannot turn away from that one lost child. Our mercy must extend beyond the dramatic moment and stay with her for the long haul. Let us work on our web of mutuality, so that all may find the freedom of new life and the second chance. Amen.