

Easter 7, Yr C, 051213
All Saints Episcopal Church

"Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?" They said, "Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you'll live as you were meant to live...!"

In the late '70's, the televangelist Oral Roberts claimed that a 900 foot tall Jesus had appeared to him in a vision and commanded him to build the City of Faith Medical and Research Center. A few years later, a chaplain was talking with a mental patient at the VA hospital in Louisville, Kentucky. The patient asked him, "Why is it that Oral Roberts sees a 900-foot Jesus and people send him tons of money, and when I see a 900-foot Jesus I get locked in here?"

It's a good question. Back in Jesus' day, Paul's day, they didn't label people "mentally ill." They said that people "had a spirit." Generally the people Jesus and his followers encountered had "evil spirits" or "demons," but the slave girl in this story just had a "spirit." This spirit supposedly allowed this girl to tell people's fortunes.

So was this girl crazy? Maybe. But this spirit that possessed her also, in a way, provided for her. The men who owned her had put her out on the sidewalk so that she could make money for them by telling the fortunes of people passing by. She was not benefitting from this enterprise at all, mind you. She was possessed. It must have been a terrifying condition, because she probably went into a trance as she told fortunes.

This spirit compelled her to follow Paul and his entourage every day when they walked by her. She yelled out to everyone around, proclaiming, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."

She may have been crazy, but she was also right. These men were servants of God; they were telling the people the way to be saved. But Paul didn't appreciate her proclamations. Day after day, she followed him, yelling to the people to whom he was trying to talk.

In fact, he was probably yelling quite similar things to the people. And he saw visions. Could he have been crazy, too? Certainly, but history put him in the 'sane' category. Therefore, all sorts of scholars have spent a lot of time trying to justify Paul's actions in this story.

We don't know what the girl's motives were to do what she did. But we do know Paul's. Or at least we know what motive the writer of Acts ascribes to Paul. And it was not kindness or love. Paul's motive was not to redeem the girl; it was not to challenge the oppressive economic system that allowed certain people to be owned by other people. In this instance, Paul was motivated by his emotional state -- specifically, he demanded that the spirit come out because he was annoyed!

He did not care about the girl. He didn't even look at her; she followed him around-- she was always behind him. He didn't speak to her; he spoke only to the spirit that inhabited her. And once the spirit was gone, this nameless slave girl, now without her means of making money for her owners, simply dropped from Paul's consciousness. She disappeared from the story.

Paul did not free the girl out of kindness. He commanded the spirit to leave the girl because she was getting on his nerves.

Oddly enough to me, Paul liberated her from one type of bondage, but not from another: her owners. And we know he made them very mad - they could no longer use her to make money for them. Most everyone can get along with others until you mess around with their money. So they might have taken their anger out on her as well as on him and Silas. I wonder why Paul didn't think it was important to free her from the other bondage?

The slave owners, in fact, were so mad at Paul that they saw to it that both he and Silas were arrested, beaten black and blue by the crowd, and thrown into jail. The jailer - part of the system, but a fairly low-on-the-totem-pole worker struggling to feed his wife and family - led them to not just any jail cell - but to the one that was the furthest inside the jail - no windows, no light at all - and he locked their feet in chains so that they couldn't move around. They were certainly no longer any freer than was the slave girl.

But the jailer wasn't really free, either. He was responsible for all the prisoners. If someone escaped, he would be to blame.

That night, Paul and Silas were sitting on the cold, hard floor of their cell - in the dark - with nothing to do, so they started to sing hymns and pray and tell stories to the other prisoners about this Jesus whom they had come to Philippi to talk about

in the first place. The jailer, despite the noise (you had to talk loudly to be heard through the thick walls of the cells), had managed to go to sleep. All of a sudden there was an earthquake...and trembling...probably some screaming... and somehow all the prisoners' chains were broken and the doors to their cells were opened!

The jailer woke up, and though it was dark he could make out that the doors were all open, so he said to himself, "Oh, man, this is the end of me! If all these prisoners have escaped, I will be in serious trouble. My life is at stake. I might as well do myself in before my bosses get hold of me and make this even worse!" And he drew his sword so he could kill himself. But Paul called out in a loud voice, telling him not to harm himself. "We're still here!" he said.

The jailer couldn't believe it! These guys had the opportunity to escape, to be free, and they didn't go? So he called for someone to bring some lights and he went all the way in to the most faraway cell. He took Paul and Silas from the cell and brought them outside. He knew something was different about them - why wouldn't anyone who was locked up not take the opportunity to be free? So he wanted to know how he could be free, too.

The difference between Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners this jailer had encountered before was that Paul and Silas had compassion on him. They behaved differently because they truly believed in the power of Almighty God to change hearts and minds in a positive way. Their captors were overwhelmed, not so much by how a violent earthquake broke the chains and opened the doors of the prison cells, but by the desire of those imprisoned to do no harm to their captors.

Because, even though the doors appeared to be open, they were not, so to speak, really open. Paul knew that if an open door for him meant a closed door for the jailer, then it was really a closed door for both of them. Paul's was a compassion that went beyond individual wants and concerns - even possibilities of individual freedom - to make a connection with another human being. And that was not only significant, it was life-changing.

Because of Paul, the jailer's life was saved. The jailer and his entire household were saved. They heard and received the Good News of God in Christ.

This story shows us not only the meaning and degree of change that is possible in human life, but also how intentional we must be in working to be agents of change.

As Christians we are called to a ministry of reconciliation, transformation, and renewal. Our own behavior and our own willingness to effect that change is defined by our relationship to the risen Christ.

What we believe and how we act on what we believe should be one and the same. Unless we are centered with strong value systems and clearly identify with a faith tradition that affirms the dignity of every human being, the difference between oppressor and oppressed remains less a matter of substance than of context. When the jailer couldn't see any way out of his predicament, he drew his sword to kill himself, but then he heard Paul yelling, "Don't hurt yourself. We're all here!" Alone, death seemed inevitable to the jailer. But together, looking out for each other, new life was possible.

Paul shows us by his example that we cannot be free if our brothers and sisters next door and around the world are not also free. So let us be about the business of opening doors, of seeing the beauty, the sacredness, and the worth of another human being's life as we see the beauty, the sacredness, and the worth of our own lives. Reconciliation. Transformation. Renewal. No one is free when others are oppressed.

"If you want to be free, there is but one way; it is to guarantee an equally full measure of liberty to all your neighbors. There is no other." (Carl Schurz)