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"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...!"

Do you remember learning about this story of Paul and Silas in jail when you went to Vacation Bible School? I think it is a very popular one - so dramatic and all! Lots of parts for children to act out - especially the scenes where the Roman soldiers get to beat up on Paul and Silas. (Hey! it's in the Bible!) And beside being a good action story, it is also a story about liberation.

First of all, there's the slave girl, who is possessed by a demon that apparently can foresee the future. The men who own her have put her out on the sidewalk so that she can make money for them by telling the fortunes of people passing by. She is not benefitting from this enterprise at all, mind you. She is possessed. It's a terrifying condition. (Think Exorcist.) And she yells out at Paul and Silas every day when they walk by her.

Finally one day Paul has become so annoyed with her (we don't know why, but there must have been some reason) that he stops and calls out to the demon, "Come out of her in the name of Jesus Christ." Immediately the demon leaves her and she is set free from its awful bondage. She is still a slave, but now she is not worth much at all to her owners because, since she is healthy, their money-making opportunity is gone. But we never hear about her again. Oddly enough to me, Paul liberates her from one demon, but not from another: her owners. And we know he made them very mad -- most everyone can be pretty decent until you go fooling with their money -- so they might have taken it out on her as well as on him and Silas. I wonder why he doesn't think it is important to free her from the other bondage.

Those slave owners, in fact, are so mad at Paul that they see to it that both he and Silas are arrested, beaten black and blue by the crowd (cue the Bible School boys), and thrown into jail. The jailer - part of the system, but a fairly low-on-the-totem-pole worker who is struggling to feed his wife and family - leads them to not just any jail cell - but the one that is the furthest inside the jail - no windows, no light at all - and he locks their feet in chains so that they can't move around. They are no longer free.

But the jailer isn't really free, either. He is responsible for all the prisoners. If someone escapes, he is to blame.

So Paul and Silas are sitting on the cold, hard floor in their cell - in the dark - with nothing to do, so they start to sing hymns and pray and tell stories to the other prisoners about this Jesus whom they have come to Philippi to talk about in the first place. The jailer, despite the noise (you have to talk loudly to be heard through the thick walls), has managed to go to sleep. All of a sudden there is an earthquake - talk about loud noises...and trembling...probably some screaming... and somehow all the prisoners' chains are broken and the doors to their cells are opened!

The jailer wakes up, and it's dark, but he can make out that the doors are opened, so he says 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!" But Paul calls out in a loud voice, telling him not to harm himself. "We're still here!" he says.

The jailer can't believe it! These guys have the opportunity to escape, to be free, and they didn't go? So he calls for someone to bring some lights and goes all the way to the most faraway cell. He takes Paul and Silas from the cell and brings them outside. He knows something is different about them - why wouldn't anyone who was locked up not take the opportunity to be free? He wants to know how he can be this way, too.

The difference between Paul and Silas and other prisoners this jailer has had before is that Paul and Silas have compassion on the jailer. They behave differently because they truly believe 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 freed 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 appear to be open, they are not really open. Paul knows that if an open door for him means a closed door for the jailer, then it is really a closed door for both of them. Paul's is a compassion that goes beyond individualistic wants and concerns - even possibilities of individual freedom - to make a connection with another human being. And that is not only significant, it is life-changing.

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 as Christians 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 own 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 cannot see any way out of his predicament, he draws his sword to kill himself but then he hears 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 is 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.

"I 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)