

## Breaking the Chains

This is one of those wonderful and beloved old stories that many of us learned in our earliest days in Sunday School, at least in part. The image of Paul and Silas, bravely and joyfully singing hymns while chained in a dreadful dungeon, awaiting who knows what kind of awful fate, is one that has inspired artists and songwriters over the ages. You can't for example, sing about "That Old-Time Religion" without noting that it was "good for Paul and Silas and it's good enough for me." Groups as diverse as those bluegrass stalwarts, The Stanley Brothers, to Phish, inheritors of the Grateful Dead's mantle as the jam band aficionados are most likely to travel the country to hear, have recorded the old folk song named for this duo. The image of their broken chains also fills our art, our hymnody, and serves as a useful metaphor for preachers of all stripes.

On the face of it, it's a pretty simple story and most of us learn it that way. The Holy Spirit or the power of God or the Spirit of Jesus has empowered Paul and Silas to perform mighty acts of healing and preaching and has emboldened them to withstand the most frightening trials. That's a pretty good lesson right there and between Sunday School lessons and sermons many of us probably know it right down to our bones. But there are more nuanced lessons for us in this passage also. These lessons have to do with chains as well, not simply the physical chains of Paul and Silas and the other prisoners, but the various conditions of enslavement and freedom experienced by every character and group in this story. We're going to focus this morning on chains of the spirit, or more accurately "spirits," as well as on the spirit of true freedom, that same Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, whose coming we will celebrate in a special way next week on Pentecost.

This is an appropriate time and place to consider the relevance of spirits. Here in the "None Zone," where a plurality of those polled indicate their religious preference as "None," we often hear friends and neighbors describe themselves as "spiritual but not religious." If we are to take this claim seriously, we must be prepared as we walk in the world to address the power of the spiritual realm for both good and evil. If ever Christians were tempted to fall into the fallacy of relying on empirical thinking, that is, to say that we will only accept the evidence of sight, hearing, touch, taste or smell, now is certainly the time to put this concept in its place. We are a people, after all, who live by faith, "the evidence of things not seen," and who ground that faith in an invisible Creator, a resurrected Redeemer, and an active and mysterious Sustainer. If anyone should have a high comfort level in discussing matters of the spirit realm, it is we. It is time, then, to set aside the knee-jerk reaction of explaining away spiritual references in the Scriptures as outmoded superstition or with psychological theories that require as much faith in their soundness as any tale of demon-possession. In other words, to borrow a phrase from *Hamlet*, there are more things in heaven and earth, my brothers and sisters, than are dreamt of in our philosophy.

I dipped into this notion a bit last week as I spoke on the idea of the angels or gods or spirits of the nations. The author I quoted last week, Methodist theologian Walter Wink, has written three slim and readable books on the subject of how we may appropriately understand the Biblical language of spirits and powers in our own time: Naming the Powers, Unmasking the Powers, and Engaging the Powers, the last of which, alas, I've not yet read. But I am indebted to his work as are most preachers and writers grappling with the subject of spiritual powers in the Bible. Wink recognizes that while some of the stories of demonic possession in the Scriptures

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may indeed be accurately attributed to symptoms of physical or mental illness, some instead reflect the ongoing human struggle against systemic and spiritual evil, the reality that negative forces exist outside of and are influential on humankind and may only be overcome with reliance on the Holy Spirit and her fruits.

But enough of high-flown theories. This morning, I want to parse this story in Acts with a look at the effect of five demons or evil spirits resident in the tale as well as at some manifestations of the Holy Spirit. The former are the creators of chains which enslave characters in Luke's story; the latter, the breaker of those chains.

The first demon or spirit we encounter in this story is pretty obvious. Luke writes, "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." One may wonder, given this spirit's recognition and announcement of the positive power resident in Paul and Silas, why Paul found it necessary to expel the thing from its host. The answer lies in the broader effects of the demon on the girl and on her audience. First, there is the real sense that the girl is not in control of the dubious "gift" that the spirit of divination is given her. Contemporary descriptions of such possessed persons or "mantics" make it clear that the diviners are seized by an external power and speak whether they are willing or not. The Apostle to the Gentiles, who wrote so often on the freedom given by Christ, would be unwilling to see such spiritual bondage continue.

But there is also an effect that the spirit has on those who seek the services of this young woman, one that is undeniably still an issue in our culture today. The obsessive concern for the future that drives people to seek out diviners or fortune-tellers is clearly unhealthy. Jesus himself warns against it in a section of the Sermon on the Mount which culminates in "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today." Central though this lesson is for the teaching of Jesus, we live in a society obsessed with worrying about the future. Not only do millions of people continue to seek the advice of astrologers or fortune-tellers as they did in Jesus' time, even to a fairly recent occupant of the White House, but whole industries are based on predicting "futures." Men and women make an excellent living in predicting the ups and downs of the commodities market, the stock market, and every other market you can imagine. Much of the blame for the current recession is being laid at the feet of traders of mortgage futures and currency futures. Is there really any doubt that the spirit of divination, the demon of trying to know the future, is alive and well and binding its chains around our culture? We must remember to be the word of faithful trust in God in our tomorrow-obsessed society. Consider the lilies of the field... sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

I spoke of the possession of the slave girl by the fortune-telling demon but she was possessed in another way, too, equally as evil and equally as controlled by a spirit. The great societal evil of slavery was and is driven by the spirit of selfishness and greed, the spirit that so inflates one's self-worth and minimizes the worth of others that it seems acceptable and justifiable to own another human being, to exploit others for whatever gain can be realized. The influence of this spirit can be clearly seen in the slave girl's owners. Not only do they enjoy the fruits of her bondage to them without a just sharing with the girl, they are furious when her bondage to the spirit of divination is ended. "When her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone,

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they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities.” They have no concern for this young woman as a human being – to them she is only a commodity. Today, young women are still in danger of being used as slaves and as commodities. The sports pages this week were full of reports of a Hall of Fame football player arrested for hiring an underage prostitute who was clearly being held and “pimped out” against her will. But the work of this evil spirit is not always so extreme. Any time any of us objectify another person, think of a fellow human being as simply an object upon whom we can work our will or as a cog in the machine that serves us, then we, too, have joined forces with the demon of greed and selfishness. Paul admonishes all Christians, “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ,” and later wrote to the church in this same city of Philippi, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.”

When we indulge in the mindset of the spirit of greed and selfishness, devaluing those around us, it is a relatively easy step to enter the realm of the next demon whose influence we see in this story, the spirit of violence. Listen again to how the slave’s owners move from selfishness to violence: “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.” A business deal gone bad becomes an excuse for aggression. Is this really any different than the spirit of those today who turn political discussion into verbal abuse or even threats? In another scene that could be ripped from today’s headlines, we read that at their trial Paul and Silas are attacked by a mob. Ultimately, the magistrates order them stripped, beaten and incarcerated in a cell without windows, their feet clamped into a device that kept them from moving. We read about such things happening today in other countries but of course nothing like that could happen under the protection of the laws of the United States, now could it? Unless of course, you are suspected of being sympathetic or helpful to our enemies. The stories that have come out of Abu Ghraib and “Gitmo” should prove once again that the spirit of violence still finds easy expression through the authorities of empire. The world needs to hear the words of Jesus over and over again from us: “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.”

I have jumped over one instance of the activity of what I have been calling demons or evil spirits in this story. Listen to what the aggrieved slave owners say to the magistrates in presenting their case: “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” They are calling on the power of the ancient demon of xenophobia, the fear of foreigners. They do not focus on the real cause of their anger, that their slave girl had been freed from her own demon, but instead play what might today be called “the race card.” “These men are outsiders, they are not like us, they don’t behave like us or look like us, they speak Greek with an accent!” Yesterday, I was privileged to meet with the leadership of Evergreen’s Black Caucus to plan this year’s benefit barbeque (July 17<sup>th</sup>, by the way). Among the other topics at the meeting was the work of a cross-caucus committee developing an Evergreen-wide response to the Sacred Call to Action against Racism, a problem still deeply felt in our nation. Meanwhile, I wonder how many of us in this room would fear to make a visit to Arizona without a copy of our birth certificate or our passport. The evil spirit called on by these frustrated businessmen in order to incite their countrymen against Paul and Silas is, like the others mentioned, very much in evidence yet today.

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Xenophobia, of course, is merely a subset of the larger evil of fear. I'm not talking about the healthy kind of fear that keeps us from sticking our hands in the fire or of taking unnecessary risks, but of the fear that paralyzes us, keeps us from doing what we know is right or from taking appropriate risks in the name of growth. Unhealthy systems are often run on the basis of fear – think of totalitarian regimes such as that of Thailand, where a general associated with anti-government protesters was shot in the head this week, no doubt as much to cast a chill on anyone inclined to join the protests as to end the career of one man. We see an example of this in the Philippian jailer of our story. When an earthquake strikes and crumbles the walls of the prison, his impetus is not to see to the safety of the prisoners or even of his own family but to take his own life to avoid the torture with which he has been threatened should any of the jailed escape. He is too afraid to act out of common human feeling. Ironically, in the aftermath of this story, even the magistrates fall under the sway of fear when they learn that the men they have mistreated are, in fact, Roman citizens. Rome was not over gentle with those who laid violent hands on Romans. Perhaps Paul had the example of the jailer in mind when he wrote to the church in Rome, “all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption,” or when he wrote to Timothy, “God did not give us a spirit of fear, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-control.”

It is to the Spirit of God to which we now turn. Like the jailer, Paul and Silas had every reason to fear the peculiar brand of justice practiced in this colony of the Roman Empire, perhaps all the more since they had already experienced its tender mercies in being stripped, flogged, jailed and immobilized for the simple crime of “speaking while Jewish.” But at the darkest hour of the night, stiff, sore, likely hungry and thirsty, too, Luke relates that they “were praying and singing hymns to God.” Being touched by the Holy Spirit brings courage and joy rather than fear. Not only does this spiritual difference bear them up in the midst of their crisis but it also proves irresistible for their fellow prisoners. Luke writes, “the prisoners were listening to them.” They recognize that these men have something special. We might call it, the Spirit of Winsomeness. That slightly archaic word, if you're not familiar with it, doesn't refer to the familiar saying “Win some, lose some.” It's from an Old English word meaning “pleasant” or “delightful” and Webster's defines it as “attractive in a sweet, engaging way.” The experience of Paul and Silas is sweet and engaging enough for their fellow prisoners that when the walls come down and the shackles break, no one leaves. Paul assures the jailer, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” Contrast this with the recent experience of the earthquake in Haiti, where prisoners freed by the earthquake took full advantage of their potential freedom and have reportedly returned to robust lives of crime in ensuing months. Apparently, there was no one with the potent witness of Paul and Silas to convince them that life was meant to be otherwise.

The Spirit of God shining through Paul and Silas, however, was enough not only to convince the prisoners to be patient and to await a better kind of freedom but also to convince the jailer and his whole household to become believers in the Most High God and in Christ. As our passage ends, even before the abject apologies of the magistrates in the next verses, we know that we have a happy, or perhaps I should say, a joyful ending. The work of the Holy Spirit has surely overcome the work of the other spirits whose influence seemed rampant and inescapable.

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That is just a part of the message that this passage gives us to take to the world: that the Spirit of God has and will overcome all the negative, destructive spirits against which we still battle. To be aligned with the Spirit of Jesus is to be an ally, a friend, as Jesus himself said, with the one to whom all Creation must give obedience. And there is this, as well: the effect on our lives from being joined to the Holy Spirit is so much better than being subject to those other spirits. Would you rather live in fear, in selfishness, in bondage to forces beyond your control or would you rather live in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? The negative spirits turn us inward, frantically protecting ourselves and what is ours. But walking in the Jesus way turns us outward, sharing the blessings of God with others. After all, one cannot experience love, kindness, goodness and so forth in isolation. The blessings of the fruits of the Spirit demand community. Let us rejoice, then, that our Loving God has broken our chains of bondage to the spirits that would bind us and, in rejoicing, let us go forth to share the blessings we have received with a world in need of blessing.