

“Breaking Free”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
June 2, 2019

Acts 16: 16-34

When was the last time you felt imprisoned or trapped? Maybe you were driving somewhere, and there was an accident on the interstate which forced you to not move for over an hour. Or maybe you were flying somewhere, and due to issues with weather or maintenance, your flight was delayed multiple times, and you were stuck in a strange airport like a prisoner.

Maybe you’ve felt trapped and imprisoned because of your life situation. You’ve got a job with ever-increasing demands, a home that seems to always have something breaking, children who are dealing with the stresses of school, parents who are facing progressively worsening illnesses, and a spouse who seems further and further away from you. Does your life situation make you feel as if you need to break free from all that encircles you, so you might find peace and happiness?

Maybe you’ve felt imprisoned because you feel as if God is further and further from your grasp. You witness a family member slowly dying in front of your eyes, and you fail to see how God is present in this unbearable situation. You watch a child make one poor decision after another, and you struggle to believe God will be there when he or she needs God the most. Or maybe you simply have given up on God – you don’t see the point of putting your faith in an almighty who never seems to be on your side, never is able to fix your problems. In turning away from God, you actually start to feel more isolated and alone.

We don’t have to sit in a locked cell to know what it feels like to be imprisoned. There are many times in life when we feel as if we are shackled and tied down, yearning to break free from what holds us back. In the story we have heard from Acts today, we come face-to-face with a prison-break, as Paul and Silas are set free from their captivity by the forces of an earthquake. But this is more than a story about breaking free from physical imprisonment. This story is about the freedom we are offered in Christ: freedom from enslavement, freedom from sin, and freedom which brings about a new life.

You see, this all starts with a young woman who is enslaved: enslaved by a “spirit of divination.” She was a fortune teller, who would give people a vision of what would happen in their future. But this was not a calling of her own choosing: she was enslaved by this “spirit of divination,” she was a slave herself, whose owners used her so-called “gift” to make money for themselves, and she undoubtedly never saw any of that money. In many respects, she was trapped, and was yearning for any way out.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the writer of Acts ties this girl’s condition to Paul and Silas with the word “slave.” For in her encounter with the apostles, the spirit of divination cries, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Yes, they are both slaves of God,

but in the sense of service and commitment and devotion to “their master.” They are not enslaved the way the young girl is, by a power which controls her, and by a society which extorts her slavery for its own profit.

And so Paul, either out of annoyance or pity, says to the spirit, “I order you in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Two things strike me about this action of Paul. First, he doesn’t address the girl; he addresses the spirit which inhabits the girl. It’s as if he knows it is not the girl who is bothering him, it is the power which controls her. Second, Paul doesn’t order the spirit out of her through his authority; he commands the spirit in the name of God – the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is not an act which shows Paul’s power. It is an act which witnesses the freedom offered in God’s transforming grace.

It is because of this gracious act, this freedom-giving act, that Paul and Silas are flogged and imprisoned. You’ll notice that it is only after the owners of the slave girl realize she is no good to them that they seek retribution against Paul and Silas. In a sense, they attempted to enslave the apostles the same way she had been enslaved for so long. But in the same way the young girl broke free of her entrapment, Paul and Silas break free of the physical bonds which had held them captive.

Their reaction to the slave girl’s freedom is not unlike other reactions we see throughout the gospels. William Willimon notes: *Paul has enough of the young woman’s raving and in the name of Christ cures her. Thank God, she is free! Yet no, she is not free. She is a slave, someone who is not a person but a piece of property. “When her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers” (16:19). The Philippian chamber of commerce moves into action.*

One day Jesus healed a mentally deranged man by casting his demons into some swine (Luke 8:37); for this act of charity he was promptly escorted out of town by the local Pork Dealers Association. At Ephesus, Paul had a big revival and many were converted and it was all wonderful – except for the members of the Local 184 of the International Brotherhood of Artisans of Silver Shrines to Artemis (Acts 19:23-41). They did not like it at all.

Here is a young woman, chained her whole life to the hell of demon possession, and now she is free; there ought to be rejoicing. But no, her owners are not free enough to do that. It was fine to give a dollar to the Mental Health Association drive last fall, but this is another matter. Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so her owners do what the vested interests always do when their interests are threatened . . .

What is freedom? By the end of the story, everyone who at first appeared to be free – the girl’s owners, the judges, the jailer – is a slave. And everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – the poor girl, Paul and Silas – is free (*Interpretation: Acts*, John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1988: 136-140).

What is freedom to you? We live in “the land of the free, the home of the brave.” And in so many ways, we are blessed with the freedoms which God intends all his children to have: freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom to vote and participate in the decisions which affect our way of life.

But I think we would all admit that doesn't mean we are forever "free." Are you free from fear? Are you free from financial worry? Are you free from addiction and temptation? Are you free from social expectations? Are you free from grief and sorrow and sadness? Are any of us truly free?

The answer is no. We all struggle to break free from the emotional and cultural ties which can weigh us down. We all yearn for a measure of freedom which lifts what can be an unbearable burden. The question we have to ask ourselves is: are we willing to accept the freedom offered in Christ?

That freedom changes the expectations of the world, from profit to people. That freedom alters how we treat others, without pride or prejudice. That freedom forces us to admit we are not in control; we are only vessels being used for a higher purpose. The freedom of Christ conquers fear and angst and hate. But it requires commitment and courage and humility if it is to break down the walls which enslave us.

Today we recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of our incredible youth who are graduating from high school this spring. If you look at that list which is in your bulletin today, you can't help but be deeply proud of all they have done, and be inspired by all that they will do.

My prayer for each of them is that they will break free from whatever holds them down so that they might break down the barriers of this world so all God's children might be free in Christ. My desire is that each of them might use their God-given gifts of compassion, leadership, thoughtfulness, advocacy, and service to make this world into the world God desires it to be: one where all God's children are free to live their lives to the fullest. My hope is that each of them might see their faith not as a burden that weighs them down, but as a gift which lifts their heavy burdens, so that whenever they face life's challenges, they always have a source of strength to draw on in the church and in their God.

Felipe, Mariah, Courtney, Jen, Zach, Faustina, Joshua – we love you and are deeply proud of you. May you each feel every day God's presence helping you break free to serve Christ in your daily walk of faith.

And may the Spirit of God live in our hearts this day, helping us to break free from what enslaves us. May we all trust and believe that we can do remarkable things, as Paul and Silas did, if we do them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. Amen.