

SERMON CCI Acts 16: 16-34 Theology at Midnight

Friday's tragic shooting deaths of 10 people and the injuring of 4 more in Virginia Beach beg the question, "How long will these senseless killings continue?" We people of faith join the psalmist in praying, "How long, O LORD?" We long for an answer to "Why?" and seldom find one that satisfies. Sometimes these tragedies happen because the shooter feels stuck in a prison of some kind. They are passed over for a promotion or raise at work or even fired. Or they feel helpless after a broken romantic relationship and in some sick way taking the freedom to live away from someone else feels like it will restore their own freedom. Perhaps mental illness drives them to murder. Or harming people of another faith bolsters their self-esteem. Whether they are built out of stone or out of thoughts and feelings of unfairness and anger, prisons are dangerous places. In today's scripture reading, we learn that how we respond to being in a prison of any kind depends on our theology, more than our circumstances.

The Apostle Paul and Silas had started a new church in the city of Philippi, and one Sabbath, as they met for worship, they kept getting interrupted by a slave girl who was known for her loud ecstatic utterances and fortunetelling. If you've ever watched a modern medium go into a trance and begin to speak in other voices or tell someone's future, it gives you a picture of what was happening with this slave girl. A spiritual power not her own would take hold of her and she would speak in a voice that wasn't hers either. She had no control over it. And people loved it; it was a real show. People holding large parties would pay for slaves like this girl to entertain their party guests, and others paid for her to tell their personal fortunes, all of which made her owners wealthy. But her life was not her own. It was a prison, she was a victim of human trafficking and an evil spirit.

Paul and Silas did not find her entertaining as she followed them for several days, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She was telling the truth, but understandably, Paul became irritated at her interruptions. I was talking with a seminary student on Friday evening who told me about being in a church where a man with Alzheimers would call out during the sermons, "Who is that guy up there? What is he doing here?" You can imagine how disrupting it was to the congregation, and sadly, the family eventually stopped bringing him out of embarrassment. The slave girl's calls were similarly disrupting. But even more, Paul recognized that the girl's words were the voice of a spirit, not of faith, and commanded that spirit to be gone in the name of Jesus. And the spirit was gone. The girl was set free.

But her owners were not happy at losing their income stream. Never mind that she was set free and in her right mind; she was of no use to them now. They wanted Paul and Silas gone before they set another of their slaves free. So Paul and Silas found themselves dragged before the magistrate, severely beaten and thrown in prison.

They were placed in the inmost prison cells and chained to the wall to make sure they did not escape. The innermost cells were the worst- there were no windows so there was no fresh air or light, the stench of urine and stool assaulted the nose, their feet were in stocks which made being comfortable impossible, there was no relief from the pain of being beaten, and they had a guard to prevent them from escaping even if he had to kill them in the process. Paul and Silas sat in that prison cell for doing nothing more than releasing a slave girl from being trafficked for the pleasure of others.

They didn't immediately begin to question if they had misread God's leading, or wonder where God was, or what they had done wrong to deserve such treatment. Nor did they rail against the people who had unlawfully put them there. *Isn't that what we tend to do?*

What do you do sitting in a dark, rancid prison cell? If you are Paul and Silas and it's midnight, you pray and sing hymns of praise to God. *Is that what we would do?* The answer of what to do when we find ourselves in a prison of any kind depends on what we believe about God. At midnight in prison we can't read a book on the meaning of suffering, we can't google what to do when we've been arrested. We can't send an email, or call or text our friends for some encouragement. In that lonely moment, we discover our theology, what we believe about God.

Major Ian Thomas, founder of [Torchbearers International](#), a Christian discipling ministry, had a saying that helps us understand why Paul and Silas could sing in prison at midnight:

**Go where you're sent,
Give what you've got.**

Go where you're sent. Paul had one great calling in life- to preach the gospel and introduce people to Jesus wherever he was. His calling was clear; but he left the "where" up to God. He traveled from city to city talking about Jesus. In some cities, he was able to start a church and in other places, he was run out of town or stoned or beaten. So when he and Silas ended up in prison in Philippi, he wasn't afraid because he had left the "where" of his life to God. So what do we do when

the “where” is prison? *It depends on our theology.* If we don’t believe that God has our lives in his hands, we can become bitter or worried, thinking something terrible has happened to us and wondering why. But if we believe in the God who says, “Fear not, I am with you,” then like Paul and Silas, we can pray and sing hymns at midnight.

As Paul and Silas sang, they had no idea that an earthquake was about to happen. As far as they knew, they would stay in prison a few days or a few weeks or a few months. They didn’t know what was coming next any more than we know in our moments of crisis. But Paul lived what he wrote to the church in Rome, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.” God doesn’t make everything happen, but when we trust him, he makes good come out of even a prison.

Give what you’ve got. Paul and Silas prayed and sang loud enough that the other prisoners listened, amazed that these two men could be so full of faith. In prison at midnight. Pastor Ray Pritchard says, “Some of God’s best work gets done in prisons.”¹ Paul and Silas didn’t have much to give- no power, no money, no dramatic escape plan. In fact, when they had the chance to escape, they didn’t take it. What they did have was their absolute trust in the goodness and wisdom of God and the good news of freedom in Jesus Christ. There in the Philippian prison, Paul and Silas introduced the prison guard who had put them in chains and his whole family to faith in Jesus. Instead of killing himself, the jailor found that “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Paul and Silas knew that kind of freedom. It’s not a freedom from trouble; it’s the ability to live free even in trouble.

And their love for Jesus made them want that freedom for others. In the words of Nelson Mandela who also was in prison for 27 years for opposing apartheid: “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” The freedom Jesus brings is always outward looking, it causes us to offer that same freedom to others, even people who work against us. They brought freedom to the slave girl who irritated them and to the jailer who had put them in such a horrid place. If Paul and Silas hadn’t shared what they had in that prison, salvation would not have come to the jailer’s house that night. In God’s hands, that prison became a sacred place of setting people free.

¹ Pritchard, Ray, Theology at Midnight, sermon, August 9, 2009.

As long as things are going good, we don't really know what we believe. Anyone can sing Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee like we did earlier when life is good, but what about when a crisis comes, when our plans are dashed, and we find ourselves in situations we never wanted to be? We discover what we really believe in times of trouble.

That Jesus is more precious than life or he isn't.

That God is trustworthy or he isn't.

That our lives are securely in God's hands or they're not.

If deep down we're not sure God is trustworthy, we will spend our lives worrying and fretting. But if we truly believe that God is trustworthy, we can confidently turn to God, trusting that he will bring us through this crisis as he has all the others, and we can even sing and find our faith growing in a prison. And woe to those who act on a theology that is weak or absent; they leave pain and grief and suffering in their wake like the shooter in Virginia Beach.

We can tell people all about what we believe, but they listen more to what we live. We'll soon have a new, larger church sign to put out on Gilman Boulevard so people driving by can know this church meets here. People are looking for churches that are credible, churches that do more than enjoy being together; churches that actively work to bring joy and freedom and meaning to others in Jesus' name. Even when it costs them something. This church has a history of that kind of heart- you provided space on your church property for the homeless even when the city wasn't happy about it. Why? Because you wanted to join Jesus in setting prisoners free, not just be free yourselves. Do you still have that heart? May you be that credible kind of church that lives what you say you believe. So when people see your sign they think to themselves, "That's a church that matters because they make a difference." Because there are still prisoners out there longing to hear about the God who wants to set them free In Jesus Christ.