

“From Annoyance to Freedom: Baptism into Faith”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
May 20, 2007  
Scripture: Acts 16:16-34

Whenever I remember this story, I hear it in the voice of Elizabeth, a great youth from the church I served in Delaware. We put on a play one year and Elizabeth played the role of this slave-girl who followed Paul around. The way she played the role in rehearsal after rehearsal, with the non-stop sing-song chant “these men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation; these men are slaves of the Most High God. . .” Elizabeth was pitch perfect, so effective that by the time of the actual performance, like Paul, we too wanted her to simply shut up. If you have ever gotten annoyed about how someone constantly is using the word God, but felt that it would be somehow be unchristian to complain, you may find this an interesting story. Paul and Silas may not have disagreed with the slave-girl’s chant that they were slaves of the most High God – but Acts says Paul was “very much annoyed” and ordered the “spirit” to come out of her.

This slave-girl was a money-maker. She could tell fortunes and see things that others could not. Her talent, or curse, brought a steady stream of income to her owners. She could see right through Paul and Silas and knew that they were Godly types – and she broadcast it openly. And Paul and Silas were very much annoyed. Now I am not sure exactly why they were annoyed. Maybe it was her tone of voice. Maybe they wanted their preaching to be about Jesus, and she brought the attention to them instead. Maybe they wanted some peace and quiet. Maybe they were trying to be cautious, to not risk arrest for spreading an illegal religion, maybe they wanted to go under the radar, and she blew their cover with her loud, insistent chant. Maybe they realized what was going on and were annoyed that she was being used as a slave. Whatever the reason, Paul and Silas were annoyed. And Paul cured their problem by casting out the spirit within her.

And then her owners were annoyed – for who was Paul to steal their source of income? We might ask ourselves two questions. First, what was the reaction of the slave-girl, with her world suddenly turned upside down, and her most obvious talent gone? And this story begs the more personal question, what demons do we tolerate because they make us money?

Although the baptism in this story comes later, here we get our first glimpse that entry into this community is a baptism into a different kind of economy. That gifts are not to be used for the benefit of a few owners at the expense of the gift-holder. Baptism is a threat to any society in which some are owned by others. Baptism is a threat to any society in which we divide into us and them. If in baptism we realize that we are all – male and female, slave and free, Jew and Gentile – if baptism teaches that we are all equal then our economies that are based on hierarchies and inequalities are wrong. In baptism, Paul said in a letter to the Galatians we

used in our Call to Worship, in baptism there is no longer slave or free, for we are all one in Christ.

Last Sunday, when I met with the families to prepare for baptism, it took Mason and me a while to get used to each other. We'll see how it goes in a bit. Mason said rather loudly as he was hiding behind his mom that baptism is "not nice." And he is right in a way, as this story makes clear. For Baptism turns things upside down. The things that have been tolerated by too many people, like the slave-girl fortune teller, must be challenged by our understanding of this sacrament. Baptism is a departure from the known world to an adventure as great as any Dr. Seuss book. And being a Christian is not easy. Our faith will challenge our easy assumptions and question our allegiances and demand much of us.

For "disturbing our city . . . and advocating customs that are not lawful" Paul and Silas were dragged by the former slave-girl's owners before the magistrate who had them stripped, beaten and thrown into prison. There, in the innermost cell, with their feet in the stocks, Paul and Silas would not be silent. They sang hymns and prayed loudly. This week I heard an interview with a participant in the Freedom Rides of 1961. During the Civil Rights movement, freedom riders attempted to integrate the south by disturbing cities and advocating customs that were not lawful. Sitting together on a bus. Refusing to use segregated bathrooms. And for their courage, they were put in prison. And like Paul and Silas did, when they were jailed, they took their faith into the prison cells, singing hymns and saying prayers.<sup>1</sup>

For high school graduates going off to college – for all of us - remember that your faith may call you to take the hard way. Your faith may call you to do things that are not popular or easy, but are right and true.

The final movement in this story is toward freedom. Paul and Silas are in jail, singing and praying and the other prisoners are listening to them when suddenly, the way Acts tells the story, suddenly there was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken and immediately the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

The miraculous interpretation is that God not only desires our real freedom and dignity and justice, especially for those who are persecuted and imperiled and imprisoned, but that God will do what it takes to make that freedom a reality. But there is another aspect to this story. Unlike most prison breaks, no one is harmed and everyone stays put. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he assumed the prisoners had escaped and he got ready to fall on his sword as his own punishment. And Paul shouted out in a loud voice that all the prisoners were still there. And they got to talking, Paul and Silas and the jailor. And they spoke to the guard about Jesus and that same hour, the jailor took them to his house and his whole family was baptized and they shared a meal together.

The metaphorical interpretation is that true freedom is found, not in escape, but in realizing that the foundations of the punishment system have been shaken, destroyed. That true freedom comes when captive and captor are equals. That freedom comes in the breakdown of all the human distinctions we make between slaves and free, guards and prisoners, guilty and innocent, black and white, Jew and Gentile, male and female.

From a slave-girl to slaves of the most High God, from prisoners to guard, the story is of a baptism into a faith that calls us deeper into a larger story. From chaos and annoyance, to a true freedom in which all are valued and loved. This story in Acts is part of the creation of the early church, and today we come to claim our own baptismal promises. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Get On the Bus: The Freedom Riders of 1961,” by Terry Gross, an interview on National Public Radio’s Fresh Air <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5149667>