Seventh Sunday of Easter The Sunday after Ascension Day

May 8, 2016 Year C

Acts 16:16-34 Revelation to John 22:12-17, 20-21

Psalm 97 John 17:20-26

In the *Fragrance of Faith*, Jamal Rahman recounts the wisdom of his father when he says “whoever’s approval you seek, you become imprisoned to them. This is the law of the created world…. So be sure to choose your jailers with care and deliberation.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Just like we were last week, we are in Philippi, and Paul is on the missionary adventure of his life. He has made his home base with Lydia, the wealthy dealer in beautiful textiles, and he is now on the streets preaching Christ Crucified.

And a different woman enters into the lives of Paul and his traveling companions: she’s the opposite of Lydia. She’s poor, nameless, a slave girl, abused and imprisoned by her owners. She has the gift of divination; she can divine the future. Within the Roman tradition, her spirit is connected to a greater spirit, a Snake, representing the God Apollo at Delphi. Anxious souls are willing to pay to see if this slave, this woman, who is good at her gift, can find a way out of their difficult situations, a way of rescue… a way of salvation. People flock to her. She is popular.

Her owners live well off her gift.

This nameless woman is attracted to Paul and his companions. She sees something similar in them. They too are slaves, slaves to the Most High God, and they too divine the future by offering anxious souls salvation. For days, she follows the disciples and her crying out annoys Paul… so much so, he orders her divining spirit “in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out.” And it does come out, indeed. And now this nameless woman is free. The spirit of Jesus has cast away the tethering spirit of the Snake, and the slave holders.

Her owners are furious; their revenues have dried up. They drag Paul and Silas to the city court and the magistrates, fueled by anti-Semitism sentiments, have them stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods…. A caning, of sorts, to “teach them a lesson.” Usually the victims of this kind of caning are escorted to edge of the town and thrown out, told never to return again.

But there is a twist. After a severe flogging, which is beyond the ‘norm,’ Paul and Silas are thrown in prison and the jailer keeps them in the innermost cell and fastens their feet in the stocks, for safe keeping behind bars. There is too much fear that they will get away. The magistrates, the jailer, even the crowds, see something in Paul and Silas that they don’t want released into their world.

I think they are lying in wait, to see if they can build up a case against Paul and Silas and execute them. These men, these outsiders, are a threat- and it’s just no about ruining the livelihood of the slave-holders, but rather it’s about Paul’s show of power. With the flick of Paul’s wrist, in annoyance, the name of Jesus trumped God Apollo- it’s a capital offense.

And this is where the story gets very interesting.

Paul and Silas, with their very lives in the balance, deep in the bowels of the prison, are praying and singing hymns to God, and everyone in prison is listening to them. And then at midnight, an earthquake, so violent, shakes the very foundation of the prison, and all the doors are open, tethered chains are broken, and every prisoner is free. The internal freedom of Paul and Silas is being manifested outwardly to others: All the prisoners are now free in the way Paul and Silas had been free even when chained.

This is when we discover that the person who has been truly tethered in chains is the jailer. Afraid he will be executed for his incompetence, he pulls out his sword to fall upon it. But Paul, recognizing the jailer’s fear, (not because he sees the jailer, but because he knows his predicament), cries out from the depths of hell, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” In other words: “oh prisoner, we are not leaving you.”

Recognizing, maybe for a first time, that his life matters, the jailer sees the sacrifice that Paul and Silas are willing to make for him. No one has ever put his life ahead of the interests of others, and yet those two condemned prisoners love him- are willing to die for him. No wonder he cries out, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

And then the preaching begins. And the jailer realizes that he is a newly freed man, no longer a jailer, no longer tethered to fear, and he washes the wounds of Paul and Silas. Of course, in that act of love, he is also washing his own wounds, and he and his family are baptized without delay. And miraculously, they all walk out of their prison.

It’s not so much what the jailer will be saved ***from***…. But rather what the jailer is being saved ***for***: a life where he and the members of his household matter, the knowledge that he is worthy of being saved. That he is safe just as he is, just as he is seen, just as he lives, no matter his rank and success, accepted in all of his vulnerabilities, his fears, his concerns, his misery, his joy, his worries, his weaknesses… He is worthy for love and belonging. Paul and Silas were willing to die to give him this gift. Just as they saved the jailer, Jesus saves us.

This is what Jesus means in the gospel when he says we are all One. We are all within the life of Jesus and the Father and that unity of life and love is abundant and full of glory. There is no separation. And it appears that the only true freedom is to be tethered to this love, slaves to the Living God- a place where all our so called “jailers” are being transformed by the power of the Life of the Spirit within us all, so that we may be free.

AMEN

1. Rahman, Jamal, *The Fragrance of Faith* (Bath, England: The Book Foundation, 2004), p.43. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)