

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Sixth Sunday of Easter- May 16, 2010

Scripture lessons: Psalm 93 & Acts 16:16-34

THE ISSUE AT HAND

Today is the last Sunday of this year's Easter season. In beginning it on Easter Sunday, we remembered Jesus' coming on the first Easter night to his frightened disciples who were hiding out behind locked doors. In Jesus' hour of deepest need, they had run away and abandoned him to the agonies of the cross.

But Jesus came to them risen from the dead and said, "Peace be with you." He brought new life to them through his loving deeds of forgiveness and reconciliation. On Easter Sunday, we went on to rejoice in the powerful witness to this same aspect of Easter life that's still given in our time by saintly people who take it beautifully to heart- people like Rose Gakwandi, Nelson Mandela, and Desmond Tutu.

On this final Sunday of Easter then, I'd like to highlight another saintly figure in the life of the church, one who bears witness to another aspect of the Easter life to which Jesus calls us. His name is William Wilberforce and I think he helps us see what Paul and Silas are up to as Easter people in today's Scripture reading from the book of Acts.

Wilberforce was born in Hull, England in 1759. He came from a wealthy, influential family and after graduating from Cambridge University was elected to Parliament at the ripe, young age of 21. He was raised to be nominally Christian, but soon after the start of his political career he engaged with new mentors and friends, among them John Newton, the former slave trader and author of "Amazing Grace", in an intensive study of the New Testament that led to a deeper conversion. Within a few years his renewed Christian faith led him into the defining cause of his political life, the abolition of the slave trade.

He came to see it as the heaviest blight on England's conscience. Though slave labor was outlawed in England itself, the trafficking in African slaves was a mainstay of England's imperial economy, especially in the Caribbean and in the southern part of our country. Wilberforce would not rest until his fellow citizens recognized the hideous cruelty and injustice that permeated this system.

He tirelessly delivered speeches and circulated petitions against it. He proposed anti-slave trade legislation in Parliament for eighteen straight years until finally it passed in 1806. The English slave trade came to a halt the following year, but the struggle to legislate emancipation for every slave in the British Empire continued for another twenty-five years. Assurance of its passage came in 1833, only three days before Wilberforce died.

For a long time in the privileged circles in which he moved, Wilberforce's views on slavery were highly unpopular. The standard arguments against him were that the slave trade was too profitable, that its benefits had become so tightly woven into the English economy that ending it would bring financial ruin to too many English, and that if England were to abandon it, the French and others would soon step in to take it over and reap its economic bounty, putting England at serious international disadvantage.

In response to all of this, Wilberforce kept hammering home the most important truth- namely, that in the practice of slavery millions of God's children were being wickedly brutalized and murdered in the name of English profits. He refused to forget Jesus' teaching that keeps before us the real issue that's always at hand: "Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink . . . but strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all this will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:25, 33).

This sad and sinful tendency, especially in our public life, to forget the truth of God's reign, to focus instead on what is expedient and protective of my narrow self-interest rather than on God's righteousness, justice, and truth is nothing new. From today's Scripture in Acts we see with Paul and Silas that it was alive and well in the first century.

Paul and Silas are on their way to a prayer meeting. As they walk, a slave girl starts following them. She has a "spirit of divination" which gives her fortune-telling skill that her owners use to make a fortune for them. In following Paul and Silas, the spirit in the girl prompts her to cry out at them, not just for a

moment, but for days on end saying, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Paul and Silas don't mind *what* the woman is saying. *What* she is saying is true, but the way she keeps on saying it annoys Paul greatly. Presumably, he'd like for Silas and he to be able to speak for themselves in declaring this truth and explaining its meaning. His patience finally runs out, so he turns and says to the spirit possessing the girl, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it does.

Here's where the story really starts to get interesting. The exorcism is dramatic and intriguing, but it's not the story's main focus. Its focus is on the response of the girl's owners to her exorcism and on the response of Paul and Silas to what happens to them as a result of what the owners do.

To put it mildly- the owners are upset. The business they do through the girl is threatened and the pocketbook she pads for them is about to take a big hit. Paul and Silas are the ones to blame for this as far as they can see, so they drag them before the local authorities for a trial.

What's the issue at hand? A young woman who long has been oppressed by an alien spirit and exploited because of it by unscrupulous business people is now freed from both of these, thanks to Paul and Silas. The kingdom of God and his righteousness shine forth in this healing so that it should be a cause for great celebration.

But the girl's owners ignore all of this. They fix on the fact that they no longer have this young woman for a meal ticket and they're determined to make sure Paul and Silas will pay for it. They don't say this out loud, of course, since it would be too obviously self-serving. But they do say, “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.”

You have to hand it to them. These guys know how to twist and manipulate a situation to their own advantage. They shrewdly steer the conversation away from what's right, just, and true towards what will serve their own selfish purpose. To do this, they launch a campaign of fear.

They claim that Paul and Silas are disturbing the city. They couple this with a big dose of anti-Semitism, aiming to rile the crowd with an open appeal to racial stereotype and prejudice. They figure that if they can portray Paul and Silas as threatening outsiders, it will help sway the crowd to their side. It's one of the oldest tricks in the book.

They throw in a heap of nationalism, too. They say that if Paul and Silas are allowed to continue their work as Christian evangelists it will eventually undermine the Roman way of life. How can any self-respecting people permit that? They can't, so these outsiders must be beaten and thrown into jail. That's the stance the owners take and it doesn't take long for the crowd to join them in it. It doesn't take long for the magistrates to follow through on it.

For their godly and righteous deed which should have been a cause for great rejoicing, Paul and Silas instead are beaten and thrown into jail. They're tossed into maximum security where their feet are put into stocks. It seems like a classic case of no good deed going unpunished.

But how do Paul and Silas respond to this? Acts 16, verse 25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the prisoners were listening to them.” Is this what you would expect?

These men are in chains. Their backs are aching and bleeding from the severe beatings they've taken. Their legs are locked into stocks, and what do they do?

They stay focused on the issue at hand. They keep seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness as they keep on singing, praying, and sharing the good news. At this point, the earth quakes and the prison shakes. The doors fly open and everyone's chains fall off.

The prison guard wakes up and sees that all the doors are open. He's terrified because he knows what happens to jailers who let their prisoners escape. He draws his sword and gets ready to do what disgraced jailers of his day are expected to do.

But Paul shouts to him, “Don't do it. Don't kill yourself because we're all still here. We're ready to sing some more hymns to God.”

The guard can scarcely believe it. “You were in chains,” he says. “Then your chains fell off and you could have escaped, but you didn’t.”

Paul replies, “We could have escaped but we were free to stay here with you for your sake. You know the demon we cast out of the slave girl, the one that kept saying we were slaves of the Most High God? That demon was right. We are slaves to the Most High God, to the true One who is love. Therefore, we were free to stay in here out of our love for you.”

The jailer is amazed and wants to know, “How can I be *that* free? What must I do to be saved?” Paul tells him: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be *really* free” (verses 25-31). The jailer recognizes the issue at hand and he and his whole household are baptized.

It’s very easy to get bound up by our fears of all sorts of things, fears that shrink us in on ourselves and makes us forgetful of the real issue that’s always at hand. Like 18th and 19th century English slave traders and 1st century Philippian slave owners, we can become especially afraid of changes that threaten the material standard of living to which we’ve become accustomed.

So, for example, if our current economic arrangements and habits of consuming bring untold misery upon other people, why should I care? If they live far away or aren’t even born yet or are of another race, ethnicity, religion, or nation, why should I be bothered? As long as I get what I think is mine, that’s what counts- even if it means others are unjustly enslaved, oppressed, or imprisoned as part of the deal.

But we are Christians. We’re Easter people, disciples of the risen Christ who has suffered for our sakes. He has come to us and bid us peace and calls us to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Heeding this call we are made free- really free like William Wilberforce and Paul and Silas to suffer for the sake of others rather than to insist on our presumed rights over them.

The courage of this freedom comes to us from the risen Jesus who has shown us a God whose love has “never failed (us) yet” (reference to an earlier anthem). This love keeps before us the real issue that’s always at hand- that we seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness. As Easter people, we know that in doing this all things will be given to us as well. Amen.

Kurt Kirchoff

PASTORAL PRAYER

Glorious God, as this Easter season nears its end, we continue to marvel at the power of Your love for all. You have raised Jesus Christ from the dead and in his Easter life You have come to us in peace, bringing us Your gifts of forgiveness and reconciliation. Today we pray for Your new life for our whole world.

We ask You to help every leader in our public realm and each of us in our daily life to always seek first Your kingdom and its righteousness. Free us from every fear that makes us skittish and selfish. Make us really free with the courage and strength that enables us to live in harmony with Your love for everyone, with Your almighty love that does not fail.

Moved by Your compassion, we pray especially this morning for all of those who are in deep suffering. We pray for the unjustly enslaved, oppressed, or imprisoned, for those who are hungry, thirsty, or without a home, for those who are victims and refugees of war and disaster, for those who are in grief, for the sick and the wounded, for those who have lost or have never known faith in You, for any who find their lives destructively difficult, for whatever the reason.

We pray, too, for Your church. Help us and Christians everywhere to strive above all for Your kingdom and its righteousness, to be willing to suffer for it with such great faithfulness that everyone will see in us the new life that You bring. Through our Easter witness may the world know that Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed. We pray in the name of our Risen Savior and we pray as he’s taught us, saying together, “Our Father, . . .” Amen.