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Messing with the Status Quo

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

Every time I get put out with the pace of change, I read Scripture and it puts me in my place and reminds me of who is in charge. The only thing that remains the same is the nature of God, and the story of Scripture is a story of how the unchanging God is forever upending and changing life for humankind. God never as far as I can tell simply leaves us to our own devices – to believe in God is to embrace the fact that we must always be in a state of change.

This odd story in Acts is just one of those places where, when the Spirit of God shows up and the Gospel is preached, things change for everyone.

Paul and Silas are travelling through Philippi when a slave girl, who was possessed by a spirit of divination and who therefore made her owners a lot of money, begins to follow them, crying out “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Acts said that she continued to do this until Paul turns and in a fit of pique commands the spirit to leave her. And it does. And her owners -who apparently up until that point saw no harm in her calling attention to herself and to Paul and Silas are suddenly out of their livelihood. And while her owners were happy to tolerate Paul and Silas’ preaching and teaching before it actually cost them something, now suddenly they accuse Paul and Silas of subversion of the Roman State.

In the old British comedy, *Life of Brian*, which is set in Biblical times, there is a scene that always reminds me of this story in Acts. In *Life of Brian*, the main character, Brian, is approached by a beggar asking for “alms for an ex-leper.” Brian asks the man who is dancing about and asking for a handout if he heard him correctly. “Did you say ex-leper?” says Brian. The Ex-leper says, “Yes! I was healed! A bloody miracle! God bless you sir!” – as he holds out his hand. Brian asks what happened, and the ex-leper then tells the story of how Jesus healed him, “One minute I was a leper with a trade and the next minute my livelihood is gone. Without so much as a ‘by your leave! Bloody do-gooder.’” So, Brian says, “why don’t you go and tell him that you want to be a leper again.” And the ex-leper admits that he could do that, but he had thought of asking Jesus to make him a bit lame just during the middle of the week. And when Brian gives the ex-leper a denarius, the ex-leper complains that it is too little in exchange for sharing his life story. Brian says, “There is just no pleasing some people.” And the ex-leper says in his parting shot, “That’s just what Jesus said!”

Those slave owners in Acts were partly right. Wherever the Gospel shows up, the world's status quo gets subverted. Wherever the Spirit of God and the Gospel show up, there is going to be change and there is going to be freedom. That old ex-leper was right. When God shows up there is going to be healing. When we feel like we are not sure what God is saying to us or where God is at work in the world, we should look for the places where freedom is breaking out and healing is happening. And as I studied both this story in Acts and the passage in John, I can identify four freedoms that happen when God shows up – four ways in which the status quo is changed by God.

Where the Spirit of God is present, we will find freedom from greedy economies that view people as a means to an end or to a profit. Christians deceive ourselves when we allow ourselves to believe that how we make a living is not related to our faith. Our relationship with God is always to take priority over our profit or investments. The slave owners were only upset when the Spirit of God took away their means of profit. Like the ex-leper, they are offended by the work of God's Spirit because it puts an end to their livelihood. So the girl's owners have Paul and Silas beaten with rods and thrown into prison. And the jailer puts them in the innermost cell and puts their feet in stocks.

But, where the Spirit of God is present, we will find freedom from imprisonment. So, about midnight, while Paul and Silas are singing songs of praise to God, there is an earthquake that opens the prison doors and causes everyone's chains to fall off. The world expects those who have been flogged and imprisoned to be crushed under sorrow and the loss of their freedom. But Paul and Silas are – by the Spirit of God – freed from worry and anxiety – even in the depths of prison. Their posture is one of praise – despite their suffering. Can we say the same when we suffer?

And when the jailer, believing that all of the prisoners would have fled makes a move to kill himself rather than face the local business and political leaders and admit his failure, Paul calls out and saves the jailer's life too. Jesus talked about how the political and religious leaders always made following God a heavy burden, but he said, "Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. . . . For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Matt 11:28-30) Wherever the Church has made following Jesus an onerous and heavy burden, we need to evaluate whether or not we are serving God's purpose or just preserving the status quo at the expense of God's purpose. Because, throughout Scripture, where the Spirit of God shows up, the result is freedom.

When the jailer realizes that the prisoners have not escaped, but instead stayed in the prison, he asks Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they say to the jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." This one phrase has been so taken out of context and misused that it is very easy to think that what Paul and Silas are doing here is sketching out the steps to salvation that have been handed out ever since in a four simple steps to salvation booklets.

Taken literally or without serious thought, the words Paul speaks to the Jailer have led to the practice in some Christian traditions that teach that salvation is to be had by repeating a particular prayer and phrases or prayer so that – like magic – we will save ourselves by means of a holy incantation. “Repeat after me and you will be saved!” they say. This poor understanding is what leads some churches to demand that a believer be able to identify a date, time and place where he or she accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior as proof that he/she is “saved.” If a “believer” can produce a date, time and place, they are “done!”

What Paul and Silas here tell the Jailer is not some magic sequence of words or incantation that – if we say them with earnestness and hard enough – will save us. Friends, wherever the Spirit of God is present, we are absolutely clear that we are free from having to save ourselves. The whole story of God at work in the world is a story of God at work saving and redeeming – sometimes – like the irritating slave girl – without people even asking God. Paul and Silas were saved from prison without asking – while singing songs of praise. We do not save ourselves by repeating magic words or prayers. God saves us when we trust in God to do the saving and quit trying to save ourselves. The Spirit of God frees us from the illusion that we can save ourselves.

The effective agent in our redemption and in our freedom is God – not us – no matter how hard we try or how earnestly we work. We must believe, trust, and depend on God to save and quit thrashing around trying to secure ourselves.

It is a little bit like jumping out of an airplane. When we believe we can save ourselves, we rely on nothing but our own works and effort. We can flap our arms like crazy, but nothing we can do will prevent us from plummeting to the ground. But if we believe in the power of a parachute and we jump out of the airplane depending on the parachute to save us from falling to earth – then we will be saved. The parachute is the effective agent in our being floated to earth. We are only carried. God is the effective agent in our redemption, freedom and salvation. We are only carried. There are not holier Christians who can be so good that they save themselves and no longer need God. Everyone who is to be saved, must get to the point where we realize that we are not capable and must rely, depend and give ourselves over to God – who alone is able to carry us from despair to hope and faith. Where the Spirit of God is present, we are freed from having to secure and save ourselves. Believe. God does the work in us.

Finally, wherever the Spirit of God is present, we are free from division and separation. The passage that we read from John’s Gospel is really worthy of much more time and attention. But, the words that Jesus here speaks to his disciples form the conclusion of what is called his “Farewell Discourse” -the final words Jesus speaks before he is arrested and crucified. And in his final words to us, Jesus prays that we (those who believe in him) will be given unity and love. Just as Jesus and God are one -we can be one with God through Christ. Really, these words of Jesus’ ought to shame and humble every one of us. Jesus’s prayer is that everyone who believes in his name will be one – unified in love for God, each other and the world. That is how God will be known in the world – through the inexplicable love that those who are united with God through Christ give to the world. Do you know what is missing from this passage?

There is no reference to dogmatic or theological agreement here. Nor is there any checklist of moral demands that must be met before unity can occur. Wherever the Spirit of God is present, there is freedom from division and freedom to love and to be in unity or relationship. We have so much to learn.

God's purpose and work in the world will not leave well enough alone. God is recognized by the way in which God messes with the status quo. And we are able to recognize God at work wherever

- There is freedom given from greedy economic practices that enslave people
- There is freedom from imprisonment of every sort
- There is freedom from the fear and effort of having to save ourselves
- There is freedom from division and freedom for unity in love.

God's gifts of love, freedom and unity are ours – free gifts of grace from a God who loves us and who refuses to leave us without options in an economy that enslaves, in a world that imprisons us in a million different ways, in a church that refuses to believe that trust in God's agency is enough to save us and in a world and church where division and hatred are considered the mark of membership to political parties and churches around the world.

God will not leave us alone. The status quo of the world will not stand. Scripture testifies to that. God will free us. How we respond to that free gift of grace and freedom – that is what is up to us.