

Liberation in Bondage Together

Acts 16: 16-34

John 17: 20-24

In 1888, Ludwig Nobel, the brother of the inventor of dynamite Alfred Nobel, suddenly died in France while on a visit. The next day, a French newspaper published in error a bitter obituary for *Alfred Nobel*. It headlined: "The Merchant of Death Is Dead." It went on to say, "Dr. Alfred Nobel ... became rich by finding ways to kill more people faster than ever before." When Nobel read his own obituary, he was appalled. He had no idea that he would be regarded in this way, and was dismayed that he would be remembered as a killer. It was a rare opportunity for the brilliant chemist to change how history would regard his life and accomplishments. A few years later, Nobel had created the endowments, several hundred million dollars worth, that would cement his legacy as one who sought peace and progress in a host of key areas. Of course, an award of the Nobel Prize today is the most prestigious honor in the world.

Nobel had not realized that his success in creating a stable explosive had defined his life completely, obliterating his values, his priorities, and his sense of contribution in his life. Through this errant obituary, he could see himself as others might view him, how history might remember him. He had the unique opportunity to break free of the perspective that held his entire life in one narrow viewpoint. So he determined to use his great wealth to redefine his legacy, revealing and promoting the precious values and key priorities that he wanted to see advanced for the betterment of humanity. It worked. He broke free and a new perspective of his life emerged that has lasted for decades.

Tomorrow night, I begin a new class with new students at the prison. These men know all about bondage and being imprisoned in your past. For some, it has been defining of who and what they are. For others, they have managed to set their past in their past and begin seeking out a new future that would look nothing like their past. In my class, Life Mapping, we spend a lot of time making sure that while the past needs to be owned, it is the past, and there is a future. They can shape it to be something that brings major changes, that turns them into explorers, adventurers, and achievers, that transforms them into new men with a new spirit for life, that even brings them a liberation within prison. But to do so, they need a pathway, a map or guide, a plan to which they can bind themselves that will bring them to their desired destination, or at least close to it.

Even among us, there can be a certain bondage to events and experiences, to paths and plans, to self-perceptions and the perceptions of others. These things can seem tie our hands, define our lives, and set us on some pre-determined course. We become trapped and enslaved in these definitions created and adopted by others and by us as we even begin to accept these definitions as our reality, like it or not. We may not have the wealth of Alfred Nobel that can dramatically change who or what we *appear* to be. But our scriptures reveal the way our God works to free us from bondage and bring us into the promise of new life in Jesus Christ. This liberation from what-has-been opens people to what God can do, a transformation that is both life-changing and life-giving. Yet in our liberation, we find we need to become bound anew in order to succeed.

The first reading from Acts is a sequence of stories centered on Paul and his missionary group as they have set up shop in Philippi in Macedonia or upper Greece. On their way to the synagogue, a spirit-possessed slave girl who did fortune-telling for her masters started shouting out, “These men are the servants of the most high God who are telling you the way to be saved.” Every time they came out, there she was, saying the same thing, “These men are the servants of the most high God who are telling you the way to be saved.” This continued for days. It may have been true about Paul, Silas, and the mission team, but it was a royal pain in the neck nonetheless. Besides, it was rather contemptuous as the spirit within the girl seemed to defy the power of this Most High God and God’s servants. Finally, Paul couldn’t take it any longer. He summoned the power of God and ordered the spirit to come out of her ... and it did.

This is our first instance where one who was in bondage, being controlled either by the spirit within her or by her slave owners or both, was freed by the action of the apostles. That which had always defined her life was no longer in control. The power of the living God, the spiritual strength of the Christian witness, brought her freedom and new life. Now, she probably lost her job, but she was free to be the child of God that God intended. New life was now hers. Problem solved, right?

No, there was more. Since the slave girl’s owners were now deprived of a good source of income, they were really ticked off. They brought charges against Paul and his companion Silas. It wasn’t for some illegal exorcism. That’s a hard claim to make. Instead, they charged Paul and Silas with inciting social unrest, being Jews (note: not “Christians” yet) who were advocating strange and illegal practices that were “unlawful” for Romans. We don’t know more than that, but it was enough for the boys to get thrown in jail. It’s loaded with irony in that Paul and Silas have freed the slave girl from her bondage, and have ended up in bondage themselves, following the requisite flogging, of course.

Set deep in the jail, Paul and Silas were singing and praying – making a bit of a ruckus in other words – all of which provided some entertainment for the other prisoners, and presumably for the guards as well. Suddenly, the whole place is in chaos as an earthquake strikes, the walls buckle, and jail doors fly open. Prisoners bolt in an instant. The jailer is certain that his career, his honor, and his life are now over.

Here is another pinch of irony; we see that the jailer is dependent on the bondage of others for his life – in other words, he is defined by bondage, by the bondage of others. As the prisoners all seem to have escaped, the jailer’s life is ruined and he is ready to commit suicide. Then Paul shouts to him, “Don’t do that! We’re all here.”

The jailer is saved because Paul and Silas have remained dutifully in their cell despite having the apparent ability to escape. Don’t ask why; they simply didn’t escape.

So the jailer is saved, right? No, even the jailer realizes how close he came to ending his life, realizing also that *his life is as much in bondage as his inmates*. He was in jail with them. The jailer knew that *he* was not free. And he longed for liberation, to

receive new life. Perhaps the jailer had heard about the slave girl and the spirit cast out of her. Perhaps he had heard Paul and Silas praying and singing earlier and it awakened a longing in him. Whatever the case, the jailer seeks the source of new life from Paul and Silas who teach him about Jesus and his way of faith.

In the end, they all *leave* the jail – the jail isn't holding anybody – and they all go to the jailer's house. The boys are given treatment for their whipping wounds and share a meal together as the jailer's whole household is converted to faith in the way of Jesus. In his profession of faith, the jailer finds his true freedom and his new life. No, he doesn't lose his job, but he can return to the jail without being bound to it. He has new life in Christ.

This business of gaining freedom from bondage and discovering new life in Jesus has one more added twist. Paul and likely Silas regard *themselves* as slaves pledged to *their* master. In effect, they are in bondage, too, serving – as the slave girl said – “the most high God.” They feel they have been graciously released from bondage to sin and death, and have bound themselves to serving their new master who has given them liberation and new life.

In the passage from John's gospel, we have an excruciatingly awkward passage that tries to communicate through a mind-numbing repetition connecting Jesus to God and Jesus to the disciples and the disciples to God. I know you're hoping that I will spend the next 20 minutes explaining it, but I'm afraid I'm going to disappoint you. Nothing I say will help; this text is a mess.

What it attempts to say is worth paraphrasing. Jesus' prayer, coming before his arrest, petitions God's protection for his followers. Jesus makes this request by explaining how the disciples are now one in the household of God together with Jesus. In this unity, there is an implicit binding together, that each one has a share in the sacred work, the sacred power, the sacred purpose, and the blessing of life. This binding together, this bondage, means a sacrifice of self. The individual agenda is made secondary as the believer now sets service to God as their priority.

Here is a bondage that is sought, that provides the fullness of life. It seems a bit ambiguous that one becomes a slave in order to be free, but it is a question of, to what or to whom one is a slave. We have already seen how instances of bondage can bring denial of one's true self, one's God-self if you will – what God intended – by being bound to what is unworthy.

Here we find that one bondage gets exchanged for another so that the believer can participate in the sacred blessing that is entirely worthy and wholly life-giving. This is the Kingdom life, serving the Lord and Master in his manner of living and ministering to bring new life and new disciples, new servants, who seek to be servants of the kingdom, too.

The Kingdom life is not lived alone. It is hard for a person to declare themselves to be faithful followers of Jesus when they are not bound to others in a community of

faith. There are no independent contractors in the Kingdom. We serve together as witnesses to the Kingdom, or we are simply serving ourselves no matter how noble the mission enterprise. The Kingdom is all people together, bound together by family ties of being sisters and brothers to each other. If we aren't part of the family somewhere in some form, then we are estranged and alone; that is not the Kingdom life.

Liberation for the slave girl and the unshackling of the jailer come when faithful witnesses are encountered, when faithful witnesses call upon the power of God and reveal the way to new life in Jesus Christ. In the end, they are all in communion and community together, reflecting the Kingdom life. Believers, slaves to the most high God, have the power to transform and bring new life. This comes by facilitating an exchange of bondage to the futile and life-sapping in order to be joined to the way of life-giving service in a community of faithful believers.

May we see ourselves as walking in the shoes of these disciples, working with our gifts to bring liberation from bondage to unworthy worldly values, worldly priorities, and worldly powers. May we be committed to paths in faithful witness that enable us to be bearers of the light of hope and new life to those dwelling in darkness, despair, doubt, and disillusionment. May we be faithful servants to the healing and life-transforming way of our Lord and Savior Jesus.