

Hanover International Worship

May 19, 2019

Sermon on Acts 16:23-34

Pastor Viola Chrzanowski

Grace be to you and peace from God our father
and the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Any of you have teenage children?

Then you know what I am talking about: Teenage
kids long for the great freedom – liberty and
independence.

At last, not having mommy tell you to do the
dishes after dinner.

At last, getting to wear whatever clothes you want
to wear without anyone criticizing you before you
leave the house.

At last, the great freedom of driving your own car!

Those of you who have teen age children know
what's next:

Your daughter who was yearning so badly for
that freedom to decide on her own clothing is
now making herself a slave of that brand all her
friends are wearing. Now is that what you would
call making independent decisions?

Your son moves into an apartment of his own,
well, almost of his own, together with a couple of
friends. And, to his horror, what is the first thing
he has to learn?

Guess what, the dishes don't do themselves! And
it takes a lot of hashing out until those young men
manage to agree on a cleaning schedule and
decide whose turn it is to do the dishes on
Thursday and to clean the bathroom on Friday
and to take out the trash on Monday.

Oh, and that great freedom of driving your own
car! What a surprise that there's not only the cost
of purchasing the car, but also gasoline and

taxes and insurance and repairs... and all of a sudden there's nothing left of that first pay check.

That newly acquired freedom turns out to be pretty expensive. That first job is demanding, and the new boss requires many hours of work in return for that pay check.

Freedom is a bit of a tricky thing, it turns out.

We all long to be free and independent and to be able to make our own decisions. And oftentimes we end up simply trading one kind of dependence for another.

So, where's true freedom to be found?

Today's scripture knows a thing or two about freedom.

We heard about Paul and Silas who were thrown into jail during their stay in the town of Philippi.

How they started to praise God in the middle of the night.

How an earthquake opened up their chains and the prison doors.

How the guard was so frightened that he was ready to commit suicide – and how Paul kept him from doing so by telling him: We're all here! None of your prisoners has fled!

And how that guard longed to be freed from his fear... and eventually asked for baptism.

A story of freedom. A story of people being freed.

But who is it that is being freed?

Paul and Silas are the prisoners to start out with. Imprisoned, tortured. Yet, no complaint, no lament from them, as we would expect. Instead, songs of praise.

Most certainly I would not be able to sing songs of praise in such a situation. Would you?

So, Paul and Silas, they are real heroes, right? Some sort of supermen, with super powers that I

will never have? Like the cliché Indian who suffers even torture without so much as winking?

Absolutely not! On the contrary. Paul frequently writes quite openly about his weakness and his suffering and his tribulations.

But there is one thing Paul and Silas know: They know that no matter if they are in or out of prison, they have the true freedom. They have been given true freedom a long time ago.

They know that God has freed them, just like he has freed the people of Israel many centuries ago, from slavery in Egypt.

Paul and Silas know. This is how God has freed us through Jesus Christ.

Freed from what? From the worst kind of slavery of all. From the slavery we all are subject to: the slavery to death.

We are no longer slaves of this powerful master. Death can, from now on, only exert a temporally

limited power over us.

Jesus freed us from the power of death. Death has lost its final and ultimate power over us.

This is the freedom Paul and Silas know about. And this is why they have the freedom to sing hymns of praise. Because they know that no prison and not even death itself take this freedom away from them.

And then there is this strange phenomenon.

An earthquake opens the doors and breaks the chains.

For the author of this story and for his early listeners, it is obvious: This is God's doing.

So, here's the freeing of the slaves and the prisoners happening, right?

Now the funny thing about this story is: This is where we expect freedom to happen, right? And this is where it doesn't!

Now obviously, we know from what we have heard: Paul and Silas have been freed by God a long time ago.

The already have been freed to receive the new life from God.

So this freedom from prison can only be a temporal, preliminary kind of freedom. It's nice to have, but it's not really that important.

And this is why the incredible thing in this story isn't really so incredible at all but rather logical: The prisoners don't make use of their freedom. They don't run away.

When the guard is about to commit suicide, obviously fearing punishment by his superiors for letting the prisoners run away, Paul calls out to him: Don't! We're all here!

Freedom at any cost? At the cost even of human lives? No. That kind of freedom would have been worthless to Paul and Silas.

Freedom means a new chance, a new life for the prison guard too!

Because immediately, this man realizes: This is not the life I need.

I am a servant, I am a subordinate. I am subject not only to my superiors, but to my fear and, ultimately, to death.

Trembling from fear still, he throws himself at Paul's feet and asks him:

What do I need to do in order to be saved?

Many of us might ask this same question – maybe using different words: Where can I find life, true life? Or: Where can I find freedom without falling into the trap of some new kind of dependence?

Maybe these are not your words. Maybe you are asking the question in different words.

But it's essential that we do ask this question!

What do I need in order to be saved? Where can

I find life? Where can I find true freedom? Or whatever it sounds like in your words.

If I do not ask this question, I will remain in my bonds and in my dependence. I am going to remain a slave, a prisoner, subject to death, without hope for life and freedom.

Paul does not beat about the bush. He gives this guard a simple, straightforward answer to his question: Believe in the Lord Jesus!

And then he does what all responsible Christian parents and godparents and all Sunday school teachers do, and what really all Christians do who have understood "priesthood of all believers": He tells him the word of the Lord, him and all the others in his house.

He tells them about Jesus, about the freedom and the new life Jesus gives us.

So who is it that is actually freed in this story? It's not Paul, or Silas. It's the guard.

He is freed not only from death, from his intention

to commit suicide.

He is freed to live a new life.

Baptism is the visible sign of this new life beginning.

Baptism is the visible sign that death and evil has lost its power over his life.

He is freed to live a new life.

This new life will make itself visible. It will have consequences in our lives. For this prison guard, it has four immediate consequences in his actions:

The first thing he does is: He gets the prisoners out of prison, he takes them home with him, into his own house.

Where has all this fear gone that he was full of before? The fear of punishment by his superiors?

Come to think of it, what had happened before wasn't really his fault, was it? His superiors couldn't hold him responsible for an earthquake.

But they sure can hold him responsible for what he does now. Deliberately freeing prisoners – that's pure disobedience, that's anarchy!

Obviously, all this doesn't matter to this man any more. He is freed from his fear, and he is free to open his eyes and see and do what needs to be done.

So the second thing he does is: He washes the torture wounds on their bodies. He does what we call acts of charity.

When I am freed to a new life, I stop revolving around myself. I no longer need to fear that I am going to miss out if I don't take good care of myself first and foremost.

As soon as I know that God has freed me, I can start seeing the other person with God's eyes. I can see what they need. And I am freed to do what is necessary, without fear for myself.

The third thing this guard does is: He sets the table for them, he prepares a meal, they eat together.

A new life, a new fellowship.

All of a sudden I am sitting at the same table with people who previously meant evil toward me. I am sitting at the same table with people who are totally different from me.

In Holy Communion, we experience a bit of this fellowship of all those very different people who have been freed to a new life by Jesus.

The fourth thing that happens is this: The guard is "filled with joy because he has come to believe in God—he and his whole household."

Joy!

We are fortunate to live in a country where we don't have to fear for our lives as Christians. And yet, oftentimes we sort of feel like we have to apologize for our faith, or even hide our faith. Like

we have to be ashamed of it.

So we sort of lock it up in a closet within our hearts, and we make sure no one will get to see any of it.

And we leave it to those who misrepresent our church and Christian faith as if it were something sad or boring or otherwise undesirable.

You have probably heard that famous quote from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: If I was to believe in the God of the Christians, they would have to look more redeemed, and their songs would have to sound more joyful.

Remember what Paul and Silas did in prison?
They sang joyful songs!

We sure don't have any reason to be ashamed of our faith.

On the contrary, we have lots of reasons to be joyful, to talk about our faith and sing about our joy! Let's prove Nietzsche wrong!

Is there anything better than being freed from

everything that binds us, that makes us prisoners and slaves? Being freed even from ultimate and eternal death itself?

This is not the kind of "freedom" we experienced in our youth: a bad tradeoff with new kinds of dependence.

This is true freedom. Freedom for life.

This is something to tell others about.

And it's something to sing songs of joy about.

So let's do just that!

Amen.