

Acts 16:16-34 Bill Uetricht 5.29.25 7 Easter

Sing: "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize"

This song that emphasizes perseverance and determination was used frequently in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. The song, of course, references our first reading for today from Acts. "Paul and Silas bound in jail, had no money for to go their bail. Paul and Silas began to shout; the jail door opened and they walked on out."

Interestingly, in the story they didn't run out, head to the hills, get the heck out of jail. They were free, but they hung around. These guys who caused trouble for the Romans had work to do right there at the prison. I guess the troublemakers really weren't that problematic, or certainly not that fearful.

What got these guys into trouble in the first place? Well, they messed with the economy, the economy that was based on some people not being free. Paul and Silas had come across a slave-girl who had the ability to predict the future. She had become a circus act, bringing to her owners a lot of money. She would perform on cue for her owners, earning a little money for herself and providing them with a big stash. It was quite the little system. When Paul and his buddies came through town, she was constantly yelling out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

For some reason, this really got on Paul's nerves. I don't know. Maybe he didn't like what she was saying. "The Most High God" sounds like a title that might have come from pagan religion, religion that viewed God not as a singular reality, but a reality with many faces and forms. Maybe Paul was ticked off by her theology, or more likely, this slave girl just irritated him with her constant, non-stop babbling. Sometimes people with mental or psychological

challenges engage in repetitive behaviors that, after a while, just wear you down.

Very greatly annoyed with the slave-girl, Paul ordered the spirit that possessed her to leave her. (Remember, this story comes from a world that viewed life in terms of spirits and powers.) And the spirit left her. This really ticked off the owners of the girl. Paul and Silas had caused trouble for them, for the economy. Their profits were now way down. The girl was free, but the owners' ability to make money off her was eliminated. So, the owners dragged Paul and Silas to the authorities, to the magistrates. "These guys are disturbing our city," they said. "They are messing with our common life. They are causing trouble."

The crowds then joined in the protests. When you mess with the economy, you get a big reaction, not simply by the owners but by the folks who benefit from the current economic arrangements. You can mess with lots of things but just don't go unsettling the ways people make money. Some things aren't that important, but some things are. And money is one of those "some things." Sometimes you got to keep people in slavery, if you are going to make decent money. Sometimes slavery is necessary for the economy.

Paul and Silas did some messing. They were engaged in what leaders of the civil rights movement, especially John Lewis, called "good trouble." And this good trouble got them beaten with rods and thrown into the slammer.

The most fascinating thing about this story from my perspective is what happens at midnight. Paul and Silas have endured physical pain and are bound with chains and now are singing "Amazing Grace" and "What A Friend we Have in Jesus." They are praying and singing songs...at midnight. Speaking of irritating behavior. I am sure that the fellow prisoners are just jamming with

the tunes. Once again, Paul and Silas are causing some trouble, maybe even some good trouble.

Most of us would be cowering in fear. Most of us would recognize that the authorities have power over us and that we would do well just to keep our mouths shut, withdrawing into our little lament worlds. But no, Paul and Silas are singing praise songs. They know something bigger than that which they are experiencing. They are trusting something good in the midst of the trouble they are encountering and have brought upon themselves.

When I was growing up, I didn't like to get in trouble. In fact, I avoided it whenever I could. Patty, my older sister, got in trouble, a lot. I always worked to behave. I got in trouble so seldom that I remember the few times I did, like the day when I took our mail over to Mindy Buttrees house. Mindy was my five-year old girlfriend, and she needed to see what our mail was. My Mom wasn't pleased. After all, the mail was a highlight for the day. It had checks, bills, cards, and even letters. Mindy didn't need those things. I got in trouble.

I also got in trouble at our fourth of July family reunion. I really liked homemade ice cream, and I knew that my grandfather kept it in the freezer that was amidst his collection of used batteries, spark plugs, rakes, nails, screws, and other things he hoarded. I brought with me a spoon and located the freezer and went for the ice cream, trusting nobody would know if I took a scoop out. But who should enter the room but my grandfather who hated most people who were are not like him, that is, white, Republican, and not a member of the Springfield Township Police. I got in trouble with him, and he spread the word that little Billie wasn't where he was supposed to be.

That was about all the trouble I ever caused. But the longer I live and deal with the Jesus story, I can't help but think that I need to

get in more trouble. Honestly, it seems to me that to follow Jesus, you need to get into a little trouble, good trouble. Let's tell the truth. Bad trouble often doesn't serve you well. Doing stupid things often doesn't get you where you want to go. But the world, the culture, and this nation need some *good* trouble.

Paul and Silas created *good* trouble for the Romans. The claim was that they were advocating "customs that are not lawful for Romans to adopt or observe." They were messing with the ways the Romans did things. They were questioning the values of the culture. Mostly, they were taking on the gods of the culture.

This is what people of authentic faith always do. The author of our Psalm for today, as he looked around at the culture of his time, wrote: "All worshipers of images are put to shame, those who make their boast in worthless idols." People who make good trouble are the people who question the idols, the false gods of every time and place. We need people who will mess with our idols, who will challenge us when we turn penultimate things into ultimate things, when we allow that which isn't that important to become the most important thing.

Money, as the story about the slave-girl shows, has always been at the top of that list, as has power. Both run too many shows in our own time. Both need to be challenged as ultimate values. Our nation is dominated by money and power far too often. Our political and religious systems are saturated with their pursuit. People, especially vulnerable people, are often left behind as money and power lead the way.

Yet it appears that money and power are not the only idols of our age. Chris Hayes in a fascinating book "Siren's Call" suggests that in our own time *attention* has become the big issue. In a culture dominated by entertainment and entertainment figures, by so-

called “influencers, by social media, attention is what so many of us are after. We want attention, and we’ll do everything to get it. We need people who will bring good trouble to a land and time like this, who will help us see how we are turning attention into an idol, a false god.

Paul and Silas brought good trouble. And note that this good trouble truly brought good. A jailer who was threatening to commit suicide because he wasn’t doing the good work he was supposed to do didn’t kill himself. In fact, he was so taken by what had happened that he wanted what Paul and Silas seemed to have. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” he asked. Something’s going on here that is big. Yes, it is a little frightening. Earthquakes are quite unsettling. Without a doubt, the man may be a little fearful. But let’s face the truth. Sometimes it is fear that shakes us into a new life. It’s fear that causes us to ask, “How can I have more of *real* life? How can I be a part of something more than what the Romans are doing?”

Paul and Silas pointed him to the story of Jesus. Here’s the something bigger. Here’s the something more. And the man was immersed into that something more, into that something bigger. And so was his whole household. What really mattered in life transformed a whole family. The love that was and is bigger than any of the crazy, false idols we create had brought good trouble to one of Rome’s pawns. And salvation came to his whole household.

Do you wonder if after all of this the jailer went back to work at the jail? Or did he say: “Enough slavery. Enough Roman power mongering. Enough bad trouble. It’s time for me to make some good trouble.” I don’t know for sure. But this I know for sure. It’s time for *you and me* to make some good trouble.