

THERE IS FREEDOM AND THEN THERE IS FREEDOM

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Nov. 14, 2021
based on Acts 16:16-34*

Let me begin this by telling you something about my late friend, Leonard Zawacki. Leonard was a Polish partisan soldier in September of 1939 and was promptly captured by the Nazis during the first month of World War II. Leonard was passed from make-shift prison camp to make-shift prison camp early in the war, and ended up a prisoner at Auschwitz Concentration Camp where he lived for four years. Four years. He went from common prisoner with a life expectancy of 2 months to becoming a handyman there. They needed a handyman, even at Auschwitz because the water pipes in the home of the camp commandant froze just like everybody else's, and Leonard's German was perfect -- that is what saved his life.

What was most remarkable about Leonard was that he was one of a handful of people to ever escape from that place of perdition. His first two escape plans had to be scuttled. Then, over a period of a year he patiently assembled two SS uniforms, complete with holsters made in the leather shop there. Then, on a particularly sunny spring day he walked out of the camp with three other prisoners in a carefully planned, low-key escape.

Not long before his death he told his story to a film crew sent to his home by Steven Spielberg. His story, on the surface, is full of intrigue and awesome risk-taking. But when he spoke to me of his time in the camp he spoke quietly, and soberly of the profound nature of bondage and freedom. What freedom is and what it isn't.

He escaped the camp and eluded the desperate search the guards there made to find him. But he also spoke to me of a bondage that is harder to free oneself from.

To never be able to free your mind of the images of what you once saw when, for four years you went to bed and rose again in the morning inside the closest thing the earth has ever known to hell itself. I will never forget the moment he rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and showed several of us the tattoo they gave him there. Prisoner No. 13390, right there on his left forearm. It was like the images he could never shake, but it was also a reminder that when the deck was stacked against him, he won the battle of his life.

There's freedom and then there is freedom.

In the text from the Book of Acts that we heard read moments ago, Paul and Silas are on their way one day to a house church they are helping launch in the town of Philippi, when they are accosted by a slave girl. This youngster has a special talent – she is adept at telling people's fortunes. As a result, those who own her, hire her out to read people's palms and provide entertainment at corporate conventions.

But here's the deal. The early Christians are convinced that she is possessed by a demon.

She takes an unholy interest in two of them, Paul and Silas. She begins following the two of them all around town, shouting at them; saying things about them no one would know unless she was either their bosom friend or psychically gifted.

Now, this woman is the picture of enslavement. And, you know, enslavement can take a thousand forms. If you have ever suffered the torment of mental illness, or if you or someone you love has fallen into schizophrenia or deep depression you could tell us all something about bondage.

I am talking about dark uncontrollable forces that some people often find difficult or downright impossible to hold back.

Paul gets fed up with this woman's raving and, in the name of Christ, he cures her. Hooray, she's free

Ah, but wait, she is still a slave; she is another man's property

Luke says, "When her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone because she could no longer tell fortunes they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place in front of the great men of the city."

It reminds me of the story of how Jesus healed a deranged man by casting some demons out of him and into a herd of pigs who promptly drown themselves in a large lake. For this act of charity Jesus was immediately escorted out of town by the Local Pork Dealers Association and told never to come back again.

Later in the Book of Acts, Paul will convert hundreds at a Greek city called Ephesus where the makers of Silver Shrines for the worship of the Goddess Artemis will immediately be up in arms because Paul is ruining their trade. Christianity in the early days was bad for business and the followers of Jesus paid dearly for that.

So, to return to the story at hand -- here is a woman who has been chained most of her life to the hell of demon possession. Then through the power of the apostle Paul, she is freed from it. There ought to be rejoicing. Right?

But her owners are not free enough themselves to do that. They are not interested in having her good fortune compromise their high standard of living.

They say, "Hey, a little religion is okay, to a point, as long as it doesn't effect my bottom line. Besides, they target Paul and Silas for special scorn – Why? Well, they're foreigners, and heaven knows, you can't trust foreigners.

Besides that, they're Jews and we all know about Jews. Yes, and if that bigotry isn't bad enough, they go a little further and say of these Christians, "Hey, they advocate 'strange and unlawful customs.'"

So look, the owners of the slave girl have used nationalism, bigotry, antisemitism, and tradition to explain why their comfortable living ought not to be threatened.

Well, we all know today that nationalism, racism, and holding to tradition as something sacred can be enough to whip any crowd into a frenzy, right?

So what does the rabble do? Well, they beat the holy heck out of Paul and Silas and then throw them into prison, and insist that the jailer keep them there, tucked away until they decide on when they can come back for them.

Paul and Silas are put in the stocks, feet and arms. They are chained and bleeding and what do they do? Well they decide to hold an old fashioned sawdust revival meeting.

The text says that "about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."

What is going on here? They've hit bottom, but they seem to be having the time of their lives.

Twenty some years ago I remember being bowled over by a story that was quite contemporary but also so similar to this ancient one. I had heard about a visit a Methodist bishop from Africa made to a church in Evanston, Illinois. The bishop was Bishop Emilio de Carvalho of Angola. The church had a potluck to welcome their special guest (the way we Protestants used to before the pandemic) and then they went into the sanctuary to chat him up.

"What is it like to be the church in a Marxist country," they wanted to know. It was the 1980s. One man asked, "Is the Marxist government supportive of the church?"

"No," said Bishop Carvalho, "but we don't ask it to be supportive . . . Not long ago the government decreed that we disband all women's organizations in the church, but the women are stubborn and they kept meeting. The government is not yet strong enough to do much about it."

Another church member piped up: "What will you do if the government becomes stronger?"

"We shall keep meeting," said the bishop "The government does what it needs to. The church does what IT needs to do. If we go to jail for being the church, we shall go to jail."

That's when the conversation began to get really interesting. The bishop continued: "Jail is a wonderful place for Christian evangelism. Our church made some of its most dramatic gains during the revolution when so many of us were in jail."

"Why?"

"Well," he said, "in jail you have everyone there, in place. You have time to preach and teach. Twenty of our pastors were killed during the revolution, but we came out of jail a much stronger church."

At that remark, the room went silent." The bishop read their mute reaction.

"Don't worry about the church in Angola," he said. "God is doing fine by us. Frankly I would find it much more difficult to be a pastor in Evanston, Illinois. Here there is so much. So many things. It must be hard to be the church here."

Wow! And yeah.

Back to the Bible story: The earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors open, everyone's chains come undone. The jailer wakes up quickly, sizes up the situation and decides on suicide as the only honorable thing for a warder to do whose prison has been destroyed by a magnitude 7 earthquake.

Apparently, having a key to someone else's prison cell doesn't make you free.

Paul shouts, "Don't do it. No one is going anywhere. We're staying put. We're going to finish our revival meeting."

The jailer, incredulous, says, "But look, you are free to escape."

Paul says, "No, you've got it wrong: we prisoners are free *to stay* and you, our jailer, are chained to this prison. But you can be free, too."

I wonder if Paul was familiar with a promise Jesus once made to those closest to him when he said, "One day you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32)

So the jailer asks, "What must I do to be saved? What must I do to be really free?" And that afternoon he is baptized along with his entire family.

So what IS freedom? By the end of the story everyone who at first appeared to be free (the girl's owners, the crowd, the jailer -- they are all slaves; yes, and everyone who first appeared to be a slave (the demon possessed girl, Paul, and Silas) are truly free. Doesn't that beat everything?

Apparently there's freedom and then there is *freedom*.

I had a parishioner once who was married five times. Every time she left a marriage, she said she did it because she felt stifled. "Stifled." She said she needed to have her freedom back.

By the end of marriage number five she told me that she had begun to see a trend developing in her life. She determined that it was time for her to think seriously about what freedom really meant for her.

St Augustine wrote about this in the 4th Century when he spoke of what he called, *libertas minor* and *libertas major*. *Libertas minor* is the freedom to choose. *Libertas major* is the freedom to choose rightly, or aptly; the freedom to be who you were created to be and to make choices in sync with that.

That's the kind of freedom Paul and Silas know about and treasure. It's the kind of freedom that gives them reason to sing and celebrate in prison at the top of their lungs.

Allow me to speak about another inmate of Auschwitz -- Etty Hillesum. I'm sure a number of you have heard of her. She wasn't as fortunate as my friend, Leonard Zawacki. Etty's journey was detailed in a book called, *An Interrupted Life*, which is made up of letters and diary entrees she wrote during the early years of the Second World War before being deported by the Nazis to the camp in Poland.

Etty knew very well the fate that awaited her at the hands of the Nazis, and yet her letters are full of the most life affirming reflections and statements of faith in life you will ever hear anywhere. They are just stunning

Here is a little of what she wrote during her time of waiting for deportation: "I often see visions of poisonous green smoke. I am with the hungry, with the ill-treated and the dying, every day, but I am also with the jasmine and with that piece of sky beyond my window. There is room for everything in a single life. For belief in God, and also a miserable end."

The ability to see and treasure the beauty of life gave her the power she needed to live every moment, and take from every moment what she needed to ground herself in all that is good in the world as God made it. From that she found peace. Deep peace.

At the end of his life, Paul will be in another prison. The Christians at the little fledgling church in Philippi (where the jail was that rattled and fell) will look all over the Mediterranean world for Paul. Having found him in the little town of Ephesus they will send one of their young men, Epaphroditus, to Paul to see to his needs in prison.

We know this because of a letter Paul sent to them; the last one we know of that he wrote before his death. Hear what he says. It could have come from Etty Hillesum herself.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through [the one] who strengthens me. (Phil 4:10 – 13).

Paul lives beyond circumstance; beyond blessing, beyond curse. God has given him the power to be himself in any and all circumstances.

Now that! *That* is freedom with a capital F.

The late Brian Doyle, editor of Portland Magazine and a fine essayist and novelist understood this too. Let me repeat his credo here. I hope you received it in a stewardship mailing.

Credo: *You do your absolute best to find and hone and wield your divine gifts against the dark. You do your best to reach out tenderly to touch and elevate as many people as you can reach. You bring your naked love and defiant courage and salty grace to bear as much as you can, with all the attentiveness and humor you can muster; this is, after all, a miracle in which we live, and we ought to pay ferocious attention every moment.*

What I understand this business of Sunday worship to be is a place where we attend to everything Brian Doyle says here. This is a place where we suspend our doubts and disbelief for an hour a week and let ourselves imagine that this is a miracle in which we live – one that invites us to “pay ferocious attention every minute.”

If that resonates with you I invite you to support it with a decision to make being here a each week a priority and also support it with a pledge that reflects your decision to live intentionally, and to value the sources of meaning and purpose like this one, you are an integral part of.

Amen