

Sermon for STS General Retreat – Mundelein, Illinois – Sept. 27, 2018

Acts 16:25-40

25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

35 But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." 36 And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore, come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed. (ESV)

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I was hidden away in a Campground just outside Yellowstone National Park when our Senior Paddy messaged me asking me to preach at this closing service of the General Retreat. His message made me immediately think, in this age of technology, you can't hide, you can go on vacation to the empty spaces of Wyoming and Montana but you can be sure the Senior will find you. Thankyou Senior Paddy for the privilege and opportunity to share God's word with the sisters and brothers of the STS, a Lutheran ministerium that I consider a privilege to be apart of and which I have come to truly treasure.

The text that I have chosen to share on is the reading from **Acts 16**. The book of Acts is like no other book in the New Testament because it shows how the Holy Spirit guided those first disciples in growing the Church and advancing the gospel in more ways than one. The Church of Jesus Christ advanced into new territory and it shows us the work of the Holy Spirit in individual lives so that they become new creations in Christ. One of the things I have been discovering in my later years in ministry is that as I pray and meditate on a text in preparing to preach is that the Bible is "the book that reads me" to use the words of a woman in an African Village.

The opening clause in the first verse of our text is one of those verses that reads me: **25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God!** What do I mean by this text reading me? Well, I mean this. I mean that it exposes the old Adam in me, it also makes me aware that I am *simul justus et peccator* saint and sinner at the same time. My old nature responds to this text by saying if like Paul and Silas I had just been beaten with rods, fastened in

stocks and thrown into prison because I had obeyed the Macedonian call of God, I'm not so sure that I would be **"singing hymns to God at midnight** or even doing compline. I might if I was feeling pious about my suffering be praying something like **Psalm 13 "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?** Or my own version of Kris Kristofferson's song: "Why me Lord? What have I ever done to deserve even one.. beating" But singing praise, definitely not. As Pastor William Cwirla in his essay "Maintaining Law and Gospel in the Liturgy" says: "The old Adam is a rugged individualist who wants to worship on his own terms and in his own way." And I would add especially when the physical body is hurting. [p.63 The Necessary Distinction -A Continuing Conversation on Law and Gospel]

The new creation in Christ in me however rejoices that Paul and Silas could respond to the unjust treatment they received in such a positive way. The new creation in me wants to join them in praise and sing a Te Deum because the Holy Spirit is at work in ways we cannot always see. By faith we trust that the Holy Spirit is at work whether we see it or not. It was obviously the Holy Spirit at work in them causing them to respond in this way to the unjust treatment they had received. After all, in **Acts 1:8** we are told that the risen Jesus had promised: **8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."** Yes, it is the Holy Spirit who causes the believer in Christ to rejoice in their suffering. In **Romans 5** St. Paul wrote: **3 Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.** And so, I trust that if I was ever in the same situation as Paul and Silas the Holy Spirit would enable me to rejoice in suffering and sing Hymns of praise to God and even do Compline. Since our worship here in this life is offered with the coerced cooperation of the old nature, it can never be pleasing to God on its own merits but only by the mercies and merits of Christ through faith. Yes, the Gospel is advancing here in **Acts 16** because a former persecutor Paul and his companion Silas are praying and praising God with bloodied backs in stocks in a Philippian jail—a change of heart and attitude that only the Lord Jesus could have brought about. As the Church Father Tertullian said: "The legs feel nothing in the stocks when the heart is in heaven."

I am also reminded that suffering is at the heart of Jesus atonement and in many cases it was suffering that advanced the Gospel into new areas. In that wonderful Lutheran novel "The Hammer of God." Aunt Agneta gives a wonderful little talk on suffering to Pastor Gosta Torvik. She says: "You see the atonement comes only through suffering. Through suffering our Savior opened the gates of heaven, through suffering his apostles carried the Gospel out into the world—rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer. It is a great favor to bear testimony to Christ by suffering in his fellowship. I believe Scripture calls it bearing in the body the marks of the Lord Jesus." [p.312 The Hammer of God by Bo Giertz] The suffering of Paul and Silas in a Philippian jail truly did end up advancing the Gospel.

This text also shows the advance of the gospel in the then Roman Empire. **Acts 16** is the account of how the Gospel came for the first time to Europe and resulted in the planting of the first church in Europe and the first European believer, a woman named Lydia. In November of 2016, my wife and I had the privilege of being a part of a tour called the Journeys of St. Paul. The ancient ruins of Philippi were one of the places we visited on that tour and where we held a communion service on the bank of the river at the site of a Greek Orthodox Baptistry in the little

Greek town called Lydia. The significance of the Gospel coming to Philippi never dawned on me until I was actually there. What has struck me since walking through the ruins of Philippi and being at that baptismal site was that we of European descent are most likely followers of Jesus Christ because of the advance of the Gospel in that place. This is where the Gospel first entered Europe. Paul and Silas and Lydia and the Philippian jailor and his family are our ancestors in the faith. I possibly might not be a Christian if the gospel had not been received here. And we need to realize that according to **Acts 16** a great spiritual battle was fought in that place to bring about the advance of God's Kingdom in that place.

From our limited human perspective, the battle appears to have begun in that place when Paul confronted an evil spirit in a slave girl who **brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She** you will remember had **followed Paul and** those with him, **crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.** And as a result of Paul and Silas are beaten, thrown into jail and put in stocks. The spiritual battle had begun and it continues in prison.

Thanks be to God when from a human perspective it all looked very bleak and dark in that jail God does a supernatural work. An earthquake with impeccable timing shakes the jail. The earthquake was natural; the timing of it was supernatural. God released the earthquake precisely at the right moment and set Paul, Silas, and the other prisoners free. As one pastor said: The truth is God made a jailhouse rock long before Elvis did. You will remember in **Acts 12** God had an angel to rescue Peter from a Jerusalem jail. As R. C. H. Lenski says in his commentary: This time the Lord used an earthquake with results that were phenomenal and such as the Lord intended to achieve by these means. The Lord is never bound to a single means to achieve his end. We see why the Lord used an earthquake in this instance: he intended to release all the prisoners in that prison and not merely Paul and Silas. [p.673 Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles by R. C. H Lenski]

One of the most dramatic aspects of this story is that the prayer and praises of Paul and Silas and the earthquake resulted in the growth of the Philippian Church. The Philippian Jailor and his household come to faith in Jesus Christ and are baptized. Nothing like a well-timed earthquake to make a person realize that life is very transient and temporal. Nothing like a well-timed earthquake setting all the prisoners free to make a jailor seriously consider that the only solution was suicide. Aren't there a lot of people in our world who like this jailor have given up all hope? People who think its over—I can't go on. It can even happen in ministry to us Pastors. We get deceived in our thinking and think –its no use, its hopeless—its pointless. Its then we need to hear the Gospel! And that is exactly what Paul and Silas give the jailor. The simple gospel! **28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.** Isn't the gospel precisely what we need when life looks hopeless? **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved."** Salvation is something

done to you. The Holy Spirit showed up, called this jailor and his household through the gospel and created faith in them. A hardened jailor without hope and also his household comes to faith and are baptized! St. John Chrysostom in his homily on this text says: “He washed and was washed, he washed them from their stripes and he himself was washed from his sins.” (Homily 36:2). And as long as we are here on this earth we need this daily washing, don’t we?

In The Hammer of God, Pastor Gøsta Torvik has lost all hope for his friend Gunnar who seems to behave like Anti-Christ. And his wife speaks Gospel to him. She says: “You must not speak that way. Sure, I’ve seen it too. But dear we are all that way, when one comes to the bottom of our corrupt hearts. With each one of us there is a yes to the evil that can be held back by God’s grace alone. But God is mightier than all evil in the world.” And later on, “Gosta, she said firmly, God is stronger than all darkness in the world. Jesus has cured the possessed before.”

There is one other part to this text in **Acts 16** that encourages me. Paul doesn’t run like a scared rabbit after he is released rather he doesn’t let the Roman authorities off the hook for treating him unjustly. **Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out.”** 38 **The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens.** 39 **So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.** This is now a matter of civil justice. Here we see Paul dealing with the left-hand kingdom. Let it never be forgotten that God is King and while he works through earthly institutions, they are subject to God’s law. As Gene Veith says: The first use of the moral law is to restrain evil and this applies to the evils of society. When rulers (or political systems or cultures) violate God’s moral law—when they are corrupt, oppressive or overtly evil—they are in rebellion against God’s will and are acting outside their vocations. When they violate God’s will they are to be called to account. (p. 99 The Spirituality of the Cross). And this is what Paul does, calls them to account and he gets an apology, which is a very rare thing in our day.

So, to summarize, in this wonderful story of the Gospel first coming to Europe, we see the Kingdom of God advancing in the lives of Paul and Silas enabling them to praise God with bleeding backs in stocks in a prison cell. We see it advancing into new territory in Philippi and we see God even at work in the left-hand kingdom the secular realm. I don’t know what your personal situations are like or if it appears that the Gospel is advancing in the communities where you live but one thing I do know we serve a God who works in the ordinariness of everyday life, who uses water, word, bread, a sip of wine or a Pastor’s sermon to create faith and to bring the Kingdom. Be encouraged—the Holy Spirit is at work in the hidden ordinary messiness of life where you live.

A hymn came to me as I prepared this message. It is one that I sang in my youth as part of a Choir. The words I think describe what was happening in the Book of Acts and is still happening today.

1 God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year,
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

4 March we forth in the strength of God,
with the banner of Christ unfurled,
that the light of the glorious gospel of truth
may shine throughout the world;
fight we the fight with sorrow and sin,
to set their captives free,
that the earth may be filled with the glory of God
as the waters cover the sea.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in
Christ Jesus our Lord Amen