

ERMF Sermon: May 16, 2010

Based on Acts 16: 16-34

Jenna Liechty Martin

Enslaved or Free?

I was sitting around a table with a group of pastors and religion professors in Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse -one of the oldest Mennonite churches in the United States--discussing freedom, slavery, and what it means to be “free in Christ.” Our conversation was lively as we delved into the subject of the early Christian Church and the writings and life of Paul. In our conversation, we kept returning to the freedom of which Paul so often spoke of: a freedom that was not contingent on whether or not his physical body was bound in prison or if he was freely walking the city streets. He continued to refer to a “freedom that one finds in Christ.”

But throughout our conversation, something was not sitting right with me. Something kept staring me straight in the eye, begging to be brought into the conversation. Across the table from where I was sitting, hanging on the wall of the old Germantown Mennonite Meeting House, was a picture of an African-American man, bound by ropes and chains, enslaved by his owner. The dark, faded picture brought a different type of reminder as to what it means to be “free,” from the perspective of one who knew little, if any freedom, in his lifetime. And I had to wonder: if the man, whose picture hung on the wall, could have a voice in the midst of this conversation, *what is it that he would say? How would he understand what it means to be free in Christ, even in the midst of enslavement?*

On the opposite side of the room from where this picture hung, there was a desk on display on which the first protest against slavery was signed in the New World by several Mennonite and Quaker individuals back in 1688. A copy of the written protest was also on display at the Germantown Mennonite Meetinghouse. In a space that was charged with the reality of slavery versus freedom, here we were discussing what it means to be free...free in Christ. And I couldn't help but wonder: Is this a freedom that is truly for everyone? Is this a freedom that could be understood and embodied in the context of physical and often psychological enslavement?

As the picture on the wall of that church was staring at me that day around the table, so too does the slave-girl who we briefly meet in today's text from Acts. We are introduced to her briefly, before moving on to the more “gripping” and seemingly transformational story of the jailer at the end of the text, and we come to learn little about her.

Here we have a “slave-girl” who is following Paul, Silas and others around Philippi as they are sharing the Good News. According to the text, she seemed to have a spirit within that gave her the ability to tell

fortunes. This ability made her a valuable asset to her owners, who made money off her fortunetelling. We meet her as she is following Paul around, for days on end, crying out and proclaiming: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

I’m stuck by her statement in two ways: One, here is a girl, owned by others, and enslaved—both by other humans, as well as by “a spirit of divination,” who is professing these disciples to be “slaves” themselves—“slaves to the Most High God.” As a person who would have known, in a very real and physical way what it means to be “enslaved,” she was using the same language that others would have used to describe her, to describe these men who in another sense would have been seen as “free.”

And two, I am struck by the truth that the “slave-girl” is professing. Although she is probably seen as one of the outcasts, and lowly in society, she is quite astute to recognize that there is something “different” about these people who are walking around the city proclaiming the way of Jesus. And yet, after many days of hearing her, and having her follow them around, Paul became annoyed. He became annoyed, turned to her, and ordered the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus.

And that very hour it came out of her.

And that very hour, the “slave girl” was no longer a “slave.” She was no longer a slave to the money-making system that her owners depended on to gather great profits and to make a fine living. She was no longer a slave to the spirit that dwelt within. In many ways, it appears as if our slave-girl, is finally free.

But I have to wonder, is this what Paul had intended? Did he cast out the spirit *because* he longed for her to be free from the economic system that she was enslaved by? Did he cast it out because he wanted her to know true freedom in the way of Jesus? If this is the case, why did Paul not free her from bondage on day one, when she first started following him around? Why did it take “many days” and for her to become an annoyance to him before he decided to act? I have to confess that I question Paul’s motives.

And I have to question what happened to this slave-girl once she was “free”? Did she find freedom in Christ—and did she find a community or household to support and carry her as did Lidia in last week’s text? Did Paul or another disciple tend to her, and make sure that she was well? We do not know...

But we do know where the story takes Paul and Silas...it takes them to prison—to an innermost cell—where they become prisoners for having taken away the livelihood of the slave-girl’s owners, and for having disrupted the normalcy in which money was made and exchanged. They are in prison, beaten and bound, “enslaved” and hardly free, yet in the midst of their bondage, they sing hymns and pray to God...

In the midst of being bound, they are free...free to sing, free to pray...free in Christ.

And their jailer, who was responsible for maintaining their captivity, and who was, in some sense “free,” we find was really not. While he possessed the power to hold others captive, he too was “bound” – For as soon as the earthquake shattered the chains of the prisoners, and unlocked the prison cells doors, he was ready to take his own life out of fear as to what would be done to him as a result of a prison escape.

But no prisoners escaped. Paul and Silas were “freed” by the jailer, who we find was a prisoner to his own fear and to a system of oppression. Outside of the prison, he fell to his knees, asking Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved. Shared meals, cleansing of wounds, and baptisms followed. And the jailer and his entire household discovered a new meaning of freedom.

Enslaved or Free?

Enslaved **and** Free?

Through today’s text, we find that perhaps these words do not have to be mutually exclusive—for we see that Paul and Silas were both in prison and yet free. And we see the example of the slave-girl who is both “slave” and yet able to see the ways in which the disciples were themselves “slaves to the Most High God.”

I will be honest, I struggle with the phrase “Free in Christ.” I’ve seen it used too often as an excuse, or a reason as to why it is o.k. for various types of slavery, inequality or injustice to be allowed to continue. One might come to a conclusion that even though “they,” the enslaved, might be suffering the greatest cruelty in life, they still can know the truest freedom, that which is found in Christ. And perhaps this is true. Perhaps, as Paul shows us in this text, it is possible to be both enslaved and free, and perhaps even most necessary, to know and rely on the freedom found in Jesus Christ in moments of greatest struggle and bondage.

Yet I think our challenge is to know when and how it is our responsibility as Christians to **act**, to respond to the slavery and injustice, and to help those suffering and enslaved to know freedom in both body, and spirit—as a whole person.

I recently read a book titled *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, in which they tell the stories of women from around the world that have turned their oppression, be it sex slavery, rape, or devastating injuries during childbirth, into an opportunity for education, health and freedom. I did not realize, prior to reading this book, as to the ways in which slavery, especially for women around the world, is still a very real oppression. According to the US State Department, an estimated 600,000 – 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year. The State Department also notes that its figures do not include the “millions of

victims around the world that are trafficked within their own international borders.” (Kristof & WuDunn 10)

To put these numbers into perspective, during the peak years of the transatlantic slave trade, the 1780s, just under 80,000 slaves were shipped across the Atlantic annually, from Africa to the New World. This is not to dismiss this as a small, menial number, but rather to draw attention to the reality that slavery still exists today

So often it is easy to dismiss slavery as something that we have overcome, and that no longer plays a part in the economic system as it did in the earlier days of this nation’s history, or as it did for the slave-girl in our text from Acts. But it does...

And I have to wonder, what would it mean to these women, many of them merely girls, who find themselves in the cycle of slavery, to be “free in Christ.” How might they know the freedom in which Paul writes within their context of physical oppression and slavery?

And what is our response? How are we called to act towards those we know, or do not know, that are bound by the oppressive nature of poverty and violence? How are we called to be a people of God’s peace in the midst of slavery? How do we share the good news as “slaves to the Most High God?”

I do not have answers. And in fact, I bring more questions than I do answers. But I will not forget the bound, defeated man, on the wall at Germantown Mennonite, begging me to ask these questions, begging that we not forget our responsibility to **act** upon these questions. Just as the small group of Mennonites and Quakers first acted to sign a petition against slavery, so must we consider how we will respond to the injustices which confront us, and our brothers and sisters around the world.

I do not doubt the mystery that surrounds freedom in Christ—the notion that one can be both enslaved and free in Christ--But I also think, like Paul freed the slave-girl from her oppression, we are also called to respond to places and peoples that are caught in the chains of oppression. We are called to sign petitions against those injustices that go on all around us and called to reach out to those who do not have a voice due to their position in society. We are provided with this freedom to respond, out of the deep, true and mysterious freedom that is found in Jesus.

Enslaved or Free.

Enslaved and Free.

May each of us seek to respond to God’s call to free those who are enslaved, and to live in the mysterious freedom of Christ’s deep love and deep peace. Amen.