



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspc.org

“Freedom”

Acts 16:16-34

May 26, 2019

Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

In the spring of 1796, on a warm evening in Philadelphia, Ona Judge, a young enslaved woman in her twenties, receives some terrifying news. She finds out that she is going to be given away as a wedding gift to her owner’s granddaughter, that she will be returned to the South, a place that she has no interest in living. So, she makes a decision to escape. She slips out of the back door of the house and she doesn’t look back.

She knows that if she is caught she more than likely will be punished. And she knows that even if she does manage to make it out of Philadelphia, her owner has connections up and down the eastern seaboard. He can command armies to try to find her because he has a little bit of influence and power.

Her owner, you see, is George Washington.¹

Yeah, that George Washington, founding father, our first president, a man who fought for freedom and eloquently advocated for the cause of liberty. George Washington didn’t just own slaves. When one of them made a break for freedom, he did everything in his power to get her back.

I share this story because our Biblical text today is about slavery and imprisonment and freedom. Just like George Washington, most people and institutions and nations have a complicated relationship to these things. For example, we live in a country that is known across the globe for its commitment to freedom. At the same time, we have the world’s highest incarceration rate. While the United States represents a little over four percent of the world’s population, it houses around twenty-two percent of the world’s prisoners.²

Last fall, one Broadstreeter had the opportunity to spend some time at the Ohio Reformatory for Women in Marysville. She participated in a facilitated conversation with inmates exploring the question: “What does freedom mean to you?”³ She was surprised at how many of the women said that they feel more freedom inside prison than they ever felt in their lives before incarceration. Here is a quote from one of the women.

Freedom to me is freedom of your mind, body and soul. Being in control and confident.

Here’s another woman speaking:

Freedom represents what is inside me. It has little to do with being locked up. Here, I found freedom—freedom from the things that happened in my life.

The responses of these prisoners surprised me and got me thinking. For those of us who are not incarcerated, why don’t we feel more free?

¹ Ona Judge’s story is told in detail on the podcast “UnCivil.” <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/uncivil/z3hd़rm/the-fugitive>

² <https://www.cnn.com/2018/06/28/us/mass-incarceration-five-key-facts/index.html>

³ The conversation was part of the Columbus Foundation’s Big Table. This conversation was co-sponsored by the Harmony Project. Learn more at <https://www.harmonyproject.com/harmony-project-brings-the-big-table-to-the-big-house/>

In daily speech, we use the language of prison more often than the language of freedom. We never seem to have enough free time. We are tied down to our responsibilities, we feel trapped by the expectations of others. We are prisoners of our calendars, slaves to the mortgage company, hostages to old age and failing bodies.

Today's text is all about the complexities of freedom. Paul and Silas are in the city of Philippi going around telling people about Jesus, when they come across a slave-girl who is working as a fortune-teller and making a lot of money for her owners. She has some kind of spirit or demon within her that enables her to predict the future. Paul casts out that demon.

That should be the end of the story. But though the girl is free of the demon, she is not free. She is a slave, a slave who can no longer make a profit for her owners. The owners seizes Paul and Silas and drag them before the authorities.

Paul and Silas have crossed the invisible line between religion and economics. Spiritual healing is one thing, interfering with commerce something altogether different. So, Paul and Silas are thrown in jail. They lose their freedom. The odd thing is they don't act like prisoners. They pray and sing hymns to God. It's as if they aren't in jail. It's as if they are still free.

That's consistent with what some of the women at the Reformatory said that day. Here is another quote from that conversation:

I've been here for 38 years. I was 18 when I got here—I've grown up here. Freedom? I just take it. I like to laugh, and to play. I smell the roses. We have the most beautiful sunsets here. Sometimes I get on my knees and pray. They can take my body, but they can't take my mind.

That's because true freedom is given to us by God. No one can take that away.

In the mid-1980's, when details began emerging of the experiences of Americans who had been captured and held hostage in Lebanon, I spent a fair amount of time imagining what that would have been like. If I had been in that situation, how would I have survived years in captivity? What would have sustained me?

I made a mental list of the songs I would sing, songs that I know by heart: all the songs from the *Sound of Music*, *Born to Run*, *The Sound of Silence*, *Singing in the Rain*, *Love Shack*, the theme from Gilligan's Island.

What songs would you sing?

I would also sing hymns. I would sing *Amazing Grace*, *This Little Light of Mine*, *Be Still My Soul*. My go to would be the Taizé choruses that we often sing at the 8:45 service and occasionally sing in the sanctuary service. These short and repetitive songs have gotten into my head and into my soul.

I would sing.

O Lord, hear my prayer,
O Lord, hear my prayer;
when I call answer me.
O Lord, hear my prayer,
O Lord, hear my prayer;
come and listen to me.

I would sing

Bless the Lord, my soul,
and bless God's holy name.
Bless the Lord, my soul,
who leads me into life.

I have been practicing these songs, just in case I am taken hostage. Those songs remind me that I belong to God.

I've always liked to think that faced with extreme circumstances, I would rise to the occasion and my faith would sustain me. The thing I have so much trouble with is the rest of life - the daily routine, the small challenges and temptations of everyday existence. I can handle the cliff edge; it is the slippery slope that gets me. How do we live with faith and grace and a sense of freedom among the daily frustrations that life brings?

Speaking of frustrations, did you catch Paul's reaction to the slave girl? She pesters Paul and Silas for days and Paul is, the text says, "very much annoyed...."

Perhaps she has a particularly grating voice. Perhaps patience is not Paul's strong suit. And maybe Paul is just like us. He gets annoyed. Things frustrate him. People get on his nerves. Sometimes he is filled with a rage he can't understand or control. Paul, who can so beautifully and powerfully rise to the occasion, struggles with life in between the occasions.

When Paul turns to the girl and speaks words of healing power, I suspect there is more annoyance than compassion in his voice. But, the healing is successful; the demon comes out of the girl that very hour. God uses Paul - impatient, imperfect Paul - to bring freedom to another human being.

In this hour of worship, in this place, surrounded by each other, we know what is true. We know that our lives have meaning because our lives belong to God. In the day to day living of life, it is so easy to forget that and buy into the standards of the world. It is so easy to judge ourselves by the length of our accomplishments, by the success of our children, by the complexity of our lives. If we make any of those things our standard, we lose our freedom.

Just ask the Philippian jailer. Somewhere along the line, he has bought into the idea that if you fail at your job, you are nothing. So when the doors of the prison fly open, and everyone's chains fell off, the jailer knows he has failed at his job and he prepares to kill himself. But Paul and the others do a surprising thing. They don't escape. They don't need to, because they are already free. And they invite the jailer to join them in their freedom. When you know that you belong to God, you are free... you are free... you are free. And no one can take away your freedom.

We don't need to be taken hostage to figure that out. Every day is a good day to remind ourselves that we belong to God.