

Acts 16:16-34 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5/16/10 7 Easter

Sing "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize"

This song was sung during the Civil Rights movement of the sixties as a way of encouraging the faithful to keep on keeping on. The encouragement came from the wild and fanciful story that is our first lesson today from the Book of Acts.

Last week when my son Micah was home from Chicago we were talking about sermonizing and about the importance of the beginnings of sermons. He used the word "hook" to describe what he thought was important for the initial part of the sermon. You need to "hook" them, he said, if they are going to stay with you. And then he mentioned my use of stories about my family or my marriage as hooks. When it comes to the stories from the Book of Acts, the stories themselves are the hooks. I mean how much more compelling can you get than stories that contain exorcisms, economic exploitation, mob scenes, courtroom drama, earthquakes, threats of suicide, and potential jailbreaks.

Our story for today begins with what appears to be a remnant from a travel diary: "One day as **we** were going to the place of prayer, **we** met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling." Evidently, during the New Testament times, people associated with the worship of the Roman god Apollo, called mantics, would serve as advisors to people with problems. Out of trances they would respond to questions being asked of them with advice that would supposedly come from the spiritual world. In our lesson for today we have a mantic, a slave girl, who is owned by other people. She is bringing them quite the little income. The girl is following Paul and his entourage and is annoying Paul terribly. Who knows why? Maybe she just talks too much.

Perhaps she is obsessive compulsive. Or maybe he is perturbed by her use of the term “the Most High God” for his God—it was a term used by **pagans** to describe the Jewish God. Who knows for sure? But this we know: Paul has had enough of her. So believing that she is possessed by some evil spirit he performs an exorcism on her.

Well, you’d think that everyone would be happy that she is no longer possessed. But they weren’t. Paul was wrecking the economy. The economy depended on this girl being possessed. The men who owned her no longer had a way to make money off of her. And so they are really angry. They create some charges against Paul and Silas—they are disturbing the peace; they are advocating customs that are illegal in the Roman Empire. And then right there in the marketplace, the place where the judges would be found, the opponents of Paul and Silas drag them into court. The crowds go crazy. The judges have Paul and Silas stripped of their clothing and order them to be beaten. And then they are tossed into the slammer, having their feet placed in stocks. All of this because they threatened the economy of the slave girl’s owners.

While in jail, at midnight, Paul and Silas begin, of course, *praying and singing!* And suddenly, there is an earthquake, an earthquake that is so violent that it shakes the prison and opens all the doors and unfastens all the chains of all the prisoners. The jailer wakes up and sees that all the doors are open. He then decides that he is going to kill himself before the Romans kill him. But Paul stops him, telling him that all the prisoners have just stayed put. Overwhelmed by what he has just experienced, the jailer is interested in the religion that Paul and Silas have been promoting. What must I do, he asks, to be rescued from all of this? What must I do to be placed under this great authority that Silas and Paul are under? When life feels out of control, we often

start searching for what really matters; we often start looking for where we can find true security, true purpose, true direction. “Believe on the Lord Jesus,” Paul tells the jailer, and you will find what matters. You will find security. You will be under the authority that brings life and freedom. And you better watch out, Mr. Jailer, this authority may bring you into a whole new economy, a whole new world.

You see, this whole new economy, this whole new world, is based on a simple creed, a simple statement of belief, a statement that shakes the foundations of our lives: Jesus is Lord. Jesus, the one who spoke of forgiveness, lived out forgiveness, even when he was suffering on the cross—this Jesus is the one who rules. Jesus, the one who welcomed sinners, who hung out with the wrong kind of people—this Jesus is the one who is the authority in our lives. Jesus, who had a penchant for the poor and the forgotten and who had a remarkable openness to women and their contributions to life and ministry—this Jesus reigns. Jesus, who healed people, like Paul and Silas did, people who were entangled by powers and diseases bigger than they—this Jesus is our boss. Jesus, the one whom the authorities put to death, and yet God raised from the dead--this Jesus is in charge.

And so, and Paul and Silas seemed to get this, when Jesus is in charge there is a whole economy, a whole new way of doing things, a whole new way of organizing life. God’s economy is an economy where death and all that death means doesn’t speak the final word. Death brings fear and anxiety. In God’s economy, Jesus is raised from the dead. Life lived on the basis of anxiety and fear is not necessary.

Much of what drives the economy of this nation and of the world and of the ways that we organize our family and church life is fear and anxiety. They reign, but not in God’s economy. Why else could Paul

and Silas be living out what I call “holy defiance” as they are singing and praying at midnight while they are in jail? They must know and trust some kind of other reality than that which Caesar’s Roman economy wants to impose upon them. Caesar wants them to live by fear and anxiety. It is what the shadow of death wants to impose on all of us. Paul and Silas won’t give into that shadow. They are going to be defiant. They are going to sing. They are going to pray. And we are called to the same kind of defiance. We will live trusting in life, not death. We will live trusting in Jesus, not Caesar. We will live in God’s economy, not the world’s.

God’s economy, by the way, is one that brings true freedom. It is interesting to look at our story from Acts today through the lens of slavery and freedom. Who truly is free and who truly is enslaved in this story? A girl who is owned by others becomes free. Touched by the reality, the economy of God, she is liberated. Two men who are thrown into the slammer are truly free. Driven by the world of God, the world where life, not fear, reigns, they sing, they pray. They are defiant as the practitioners of death want to intimidate them. They are truly free.

And yet on the other hand, the folks who appear to be free, the girl’s owners, the judges, the crowds, they truly are enslaved. How pitiful it is to make your living off the back of someone else and have to trump up charges, make up stories about others because you are so fearful! How sad it is when you need to toss people into jail because they upset your sick economy! Who truly is enslaved in this story and who truly is free?

God’s economy brings freedom. In God’s economy, the world where Jesus is Lord, people are not to be used for gain. People are too valuable to be used as pawns. In God’s economy, people are meant to

live and do live in freedom. In God's economy, the folks we might want to walk all over and we ourselves are set free because, you see, in God's economy, it is love that rules. And it is love that truly sets free. We live in an economy of love. Trust me! That economy is much different than the economy where fear, anxiety, and death rule.

Folks, "keep your eyes on the prize!" Keep your eyes on the economy of love, the world where Jesus is Lord. Keep your eyes on that prize and hold on. Hold on because it's tough out there. And hold on because you might never know where that economy might take you. Oh the freedom that it will bring you!