

WELCOME 4th July 2021 – 6 Pentecost '21 B

Acts 16:16-34

Welcome! It's great to be together. As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources for you to use *over the course of the week. As God leads you into the fullness of His word/work in your life he will then introduce you to someone who needs to hear the good news from you. Also... somewhere here today you may feel a nudge - tap - tug. Don't ignore it! That's probably the Holy Spirit prompting you some way. Let's talk about that after worship.*

As we move into this week... Freedom – not what Wm Wallace (real/movie one) would say as their last words nor what the *Declaration of Independence* was supposed to accomplish...& certainly not what our post-modern world assumes as the ability to do whatever you want whenever you want & have someone else pay for it...but true freedom **FROM** the burden & weight of human sin – the shackles of death – the tricks, traps & tripwires of evil...& **FOR to** serve one another in love. Gal 5:13 **living** as servants of God. 1 Pet 2:16

Geo MacDonald "...not the liberty to do whatever one likes, but the power of doing whatever one sees ought to be done, even in the very face of otherwise overwhelming impulse."

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. - Jn 8:36 Freedom in Christ means we move beyond individualistic wants & comforts so the light of Christ might lead another out of darkness & into light & life...& we live in such a way that demonstrates Jesus is more precious than life itself. (John Piper adapted)

In this seemingly endless season of rolling restrictions & ever-updated often confusing health advice...when it might be just easier safer smarter to pull away from the world, we have an unrelenting responsibility to **boldly** walk into our world/relationship to say to everyone around us: "**Believe in the Lord Jesus & you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.**"

We'll explore & experience that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Lord God, heavenly Father, in raising your Son Jesus from the grave in glory and in sending us your Spirit, you open the way to eternal life. As we grow in our relationship with and resemblance to Christ each day, let your life burst forth so that each step we take and each word we speak reflects the boldness and certainty we have in you. We ask this in your name. Amen

Let's be encouraged by some music

FAITH CHAT:

1. What's the boldest act of faith you've ever undertaken?
2. If God would increase your "boldness" in one area of your life...where would it be and why?

BLESSING/SENDING

*The Lord who conquered darkness with light,
give you light.*

*The Lord who conquered death with life,
give you life.*

*The Lord who conquered loneliness with love,
fear with peace, & sadness with joy
give you love, peace, and joy. Amen*

6 Pentecost – '21 B – GETTING OUR ACTS TOGETHER: BOLD ACTS

Déjà vu – that feeling you're reliving a certain situation/circumstance/moment in your life...Fr "*already seen*." It's that eerie sense that this moment in time is being repeated from some other moment...you've been t/here ^{b/4}...don't know about you but now/this fortnight: masks AGAIN, restrictions again, plans/camps/concerts cancelled again #s & personal space measured again, borders closed again...anxieties & worries again apprehension again...fear/confusion again...Your life constrained & measured against some outside std...like you're enslaved on multiple levels...Personal freedom? No. Self-determination? Autonomy? Discuss/disagree? Wider vision purpose meaning to life? You have your "box" now stay there... "*put on your mask & don't whine*"

Just like the slave-girl in today's account...enslaved on multiple levels. Embodying a "**spirit that** *enabled her to tell the future. She earned a lot of money for her masters by telling fortunes.*" Spiritual bondage & LITERALLY owned by men for whom she is nothing more than a cash cow \$\$-maker meal ticket. She may have insight into a paying customer's future, but her future is what THEY decide. EVERY. DAY. IS. THE. SAME. Personal freedom? No. Self-determination? Autonomy? Discuss/disagree? Vision purpose meaning to life? You have your "box" now stay there...now pick the horse/groom for the punter like a good girl. Déjà vu again

But like demons who spotted Jesus a mile off & acknowledged **HIS** sovereignty, she stalks Paul & his companions crying out **they alone** can lead you to salvation. Now stop there for a minute...**salvation**...The Biblical image of salvation is not some go to heaven while others go to hell. That is too small a picture of what the Father intends in rescuing us from sin/death/evil...it leaves out the important details. As we dig deeper into the Scriptures, we discover "salvation" is the complete re-making of everything by the power of God as the Father reclaims what sin has captured & restores it to Himself. It involves absolute peace/contentment – healing/wholeness - harmony/satisfaction – forgiveness/reconciliation - universal flourishing abundance & delight...all creation wedded to the Father in love & justice & joy.

Paul boldly sets her free by the power of the One who brings real salvation in full by his death/rez...She was a slave in a world that saw Zeus as the most high god & Caesar as his representative on earth... "Salvation" in their world was the stability, security & prosperity of the Roman Empire. So in releasing her from spiritual bondage Paul made it clear that Zeus/Caesar/spirits are powerless nobodies. In a world of competing claims for power, wholeness, satisfaction & "salvation" **only the** name of Jesus is powerful enough to bring all the broken souls & disordered lives & crushed hearts...lost...wandering...searching into perfect peace with the Father.

I find it notable there is no indication Paul felt tenderly toward this beleaguered girl. He's just annoyed. She's trailing along squawking like a parrot & even though she is

correct, it eventually bugs him enough to set her half-free...she's still a slave, just now one who can't spin visions into gold. From her human owners' perspective Paul & Silas have upset the balance of trade at the markets & so they drag them ^{b/4} the marketplace managers ^{w/} some pretty wild accusations...All of which earns them a mighty flogging & a night in jail. sometimes you suffer for doing the right thing

Boldness for the name of Christ in this world has a price. Sometimes you get punished for doing the right thing...bold thing...but in boldly bringing freedom to this girl we discover: freedom in Christ builds others up. Freedom in Christ cares for & nurtures those around us & looks to bring love & joy into every life. Real freedom in Christ makes you a force for good & a force for God's purposes. How many times did Jesus promise it would be costly to follow him? How many times did Jesus promise those who are drawn to him in faith would be scorned & derided by the world around them? Even our closest relationships would be challenged by his presence: "**Don't** *imagine I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword. 'I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother & a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.'*" - Mt 10:34ff *your enemies will be in your own household!*

Would that belonging to God's Kingdom was as simple as praying the sinner's salvation prayer & going out to tea ^{w/} friends. It's not. Belonging to Jesus starts ^{w/} the violent overthrow of the kingdom of darkness/sin in our world by his death/rez & then the radical overthrow of the kingdom of me/you in our hearts so he can rule all things by his power & love. As that occurs Christ takes over & puts to death all the lingering darkness that hangs on hoping for a retreat on our part. Sin/death/evil is conquered & love/grace/mercy/peace/joy claim victory. Day after day after day...& the battle goes on for a lifetime even though we know the eternal triumph is his. Being remade in the image of Christ is no easy once & done thing...There is a cost to living boldly the name/claims of Jesus. Sometimes you get punished for doing the right thing...bold thing...but as Paul boldly brings freedom to this girl we discover: freedom in Christ builds others up & never backs down.

Around midnight Paul & Silas were **praying & singing hymns to God, & the other prisoners were listening**. You know this...**It is** always a good idea to sing in prison. Paul/Silas experience a bold freedom that can't be caged. They know who sees them in the darkness & has bigger songs for them than the emperor's cell. They were singing because they had something nobody could shackle. They were singing the story of One who entered the dark corners & prisons of our lives so we might join him in true freedom & victory...who himself entered the dark prison of our grave so we could enter the freedom of his eternal life...& **boldly approach the throne of grace & find mercy & grace to help when we need it most.** - Heb 4:16-17 *always sing in prison*

There is a sense of bold assurance & calm confidence in their actions that speaks to a trust in God despite the circumstances. Being God's servant does not mean escape from dangerous places, it just means we have the opportunity to be the voice & the hands of Christ even there. Because even there...the other prisoners were listening. Of course they are...what else are they gonna do? They're literally a captive audience...But the prisoners saw the strange actions of these two beaten & bruised fellow captives & they heard their songs despite their physical condition...I suspect they wanted for themselves what Paul & Silas were singing about. (Dan 3:17-18 - Rack Shack & Benny – "...the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up." We will not sing **your** song)

What could make a person joyful & confident even in prison? Other prisoners had never seen it ^{b/4} & the prisoners were listening. People imprisoned all around us listen to us as well. They are observing the way we act when it's dark & the threat level is high. They're watching to see if you're gonna fold up your tent when a virus shows up; when the Dr. looks despondent, when midnight rolls around & you don't have any answers or any sleep. They're listening to the songs we sing from **our** jail cells. No matter how much we might want to avoid those imprisoned midnights in our lives; dark times come. Those fellow prisoners who share this life ^{w/} you are watching & listening to the songs you sing while the shackles are on.

If you're singing my hair's on fire & I don't know what to do...I think you need a new song book.

This world wants there to be a better path than the one we are on & a better song than "Gloom despair & agony on me." Like it or not, what we say & do impacts how others see God. If they see us as a mob of complaining joyless sooks they aren't going to want Jesus anywhere near their lives because he obviously isn't making a difference in ours! Strongest argument for OR against Xnty is us. joy certainty boldness assurance compassion that swims against the flow of a me-first culture BUT somber dour grim smug self-righteous assured everyone else is going to hell...

But when the songs break out there's a massive earthquake & the cell doors flew open. For the jailer that means his life is over. To lose a prisoner is to take their place & punishment & that's why he's about to turn himself into a pin cushion. Except no one escaped. Could it be that when prisons bust open (name your prison - drugs, abuse, religion, financial fears...mental illness...) folks may not run for the hills because they want to know who popped the locks...So just as Paul/Silas shared the gospel in song ^{w/} their fellow prisoners, now they save their jailer both from taking his own life & from a life & death apart from Christ.

Now...Bible doesn't tell us all they shared ^{w/} the jailer, the prisoners, & the jailer's family. But you can bet it sounded something like...Every life can be transformed by the cross of Jesus Christ. Every life can be redeemed by Christ's resurrection. Every encounter ^{w/} Jesus has the power to blow the doors off your prison & to bust the shackles off your feet so you can dance & to cut loose your joy so you can sing.

You see...you & I have been handed, by the Holy Spirit, the power to release people from sin/death/evil/the chains of their lives & to plant in them the song that shakes the earth in their souls. Freedom in Christ means we move beyond individualistic wants & comforts so the light of Christ might lead another out of darkness & into light & life...& we boldly live in such a way that demonstrates Jesus is more precious than life itself.

Jesus takes us into the life of God (creates a unity/oneness ^{b/t} us & F-S-HS) so that we live now under God's blessing, power, provision & protection ^{w/} our hearts compelled to carry the good news of God's rule of grace in Jesus to the world. Freedom in Christ builds others up. Freedom in Christ cares for & nurtures those around us & looks to bring love & joy into every life. Real freedom in Christ makes you a force for good & a force for God's purposes.

No cell on earth – no chain on the planet is strong enough to bind the follower of Jesus who sees every cell every chain every midnight as the place of witness mission prayer & singing...as the place where God has sent you & the circumstance for which he has given you the good news...to go & give...

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Take it home...

Who in your circle of acquaintance needs the freedom only Christ can give?
How will you share that with them?

30 secs... **Go**...I'll pray for us to close...

Lord Jesus, the fields are ready for harvest, but the labourers are few. Open our hearts to see that we are standing in the middle of those fields & you have given us all we need for the harvest. Give us boldness to proclaim that your Kingdom has indeed, come near and that love and life are offered to all. We ask this in your precious name. Amen.