

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Acts 16:16-34

If I was Paul in this story, by verse 22, definitely by 23, I'd be loathing myself thinking "why? Why did I have to react? Why did I even open my mouth?" Because despite his attempt at good, his actions have definitely affected his own quality of life as he sits there beat-up and in prison, and it is hard to tell how much lasting good will survive the fall-out. He thought he was doing good, but he has made himself a flash-point for peoples' venom and anger, and they have attacked him. What happened? It's not like he did something criminal or anything of the like. He healed a girl. How could anyone argue with freeing a girl from spirit possession and from exploitation? And yet everyone has gone mad! Even the average market-goers have joined-in in attacking them. They want Paul and Silas out.

So, what happened here? What is your theory?

In this season of Easter, we have been focusing on readings from Acts, of the gospel and the apostles ministering and preaching at the start of the church. In the early chapters of Acts, people were watching the apostles heal and help. They listening and responded and joined "the way." We might expect that energy to continue. We might expect also that if Paul and Silas come into this new community and positively benefit that community, that would give them a hearing, an in-road for the gospel there. Instead, Paul and Silas are cast as disturbing the peace of the community. Things go wonky here. Why? How would you explain it?

Now we can understand why the handlers of this slave-girl are upset. We can dismiss them as merely being in it for the power and money. But what about the magistrates, the community leaders? And why would the people join in in attacking Paul and Silas? Are they somehow tied to some kind of organized crime ring? What do they have to gain by protecting the slave-girl's handlers, by throwing out these men that can heal and help?

What is your theory?

For me, it makes a degree of sense only through Family Systems Theory. Systems Theory puts emphasis not on individual choices or individual spirituality or integrity as much as it does on the dynamics of a group, of our interactions and compensations in response to each other within a group, within a system. It means that we are connected and we are never acting 100% independently. We are always compensating or reacting to some degree. Systems theory talks to how the system

shape the roles we come to play, and how we come to understand ourselves or to function in relation to each other, in relation to groups, whether family, or an institution, or a community, or a nation.

One of the core principles of Systems theory is that of stasis – meaning stability or equilibrium. Colloquially, we might express the notion of stasis as that feeling where everyone is just getting along, and “everyone” is happy. That is what we want. That sense that everything is just flowing along. In this notion of stasis, a system seeks or puts energy into maintaining its balance, its stability, its equilibrium. And so, the system develops responses to stresses that affect that system, whether those stresses come from within the system, or from outside the system. A related term is homeostasis, which is defined as follows: “the tendency toward a relatively stable equilibrium between interdependent elements.” The parts of the system participate in an equilibrium, a balance, a way of functioning, and the energy of the system is aimed towards preserving that balance, and reacting towards threats that may come from within, or may be stresses that come from outside.

When you think about a family’s sense of everybody “getting along,” it’s why the mother of the house often tells everybody not to talk politics at thanksgiving. Because, sometimes the stresses come from within, like a family member whose temper or tendency towards conflict or addictions can take over the system. So how do others in the system react? Often to make it better, to tamp it down, to ask others to accommodate, to take on dramatic roles sometimes, all to do what? To reestablish the equilibrium, to bring things back into order, into the familiar where everyone knows how to function, and where it once again feels like “everybody is getting along.”

I suspect you all have had your own encounters with a such a system. If you have ever decided to confront someone or raise your voice only to be met by a red face boiling with rage, and you feel the impulse to back down, afraid to find out what will happen if you keep going down that trail. Or you even find yourself being confronted by others in the system, because they are trying to get you to capitulate and accommodate. Because the concern that takes over is not what is right or best, but getting the system back to equilibrium. And like Paul, you find yourself wondering why you even raised your voice.

Sometimes the stresses come from without – come from an outside stress or force imposing upon or disrupting the balance. Paul and Silas come into a community, and they do just that. They represent a stressor to the system’s equilibrium. And rather than celebrating the good they have done, Paul and Silas get attacked because they have disturbed the stasis. And everybody in the community wants to get back to stasis.

I grew up in the church. I took faith seriously as a high school student. I was trained as a Young Life leader in college. I began in youth ministry at 22. I was well trained. And there is a theology that undergirds our tradition and guides our ministry. It is that we are broken. Society is broken and marred by sin. As Norman Maclean's father would say, "man by nature is a damn mess." We are broken, and God, in Christ offers forgiveness for the effects of that sinfulness and brokenness. And in Christ, we can be redeemed and find wholeness and fullness. For I came not to steal, kill, or destroy, Jesus says in John's gospel, but that you man have life and life to the fullest.

What I realized only in time, however, is that while we may decide something is broken, and dysfunctional from a theological or theoretical or even ethical point of view, it may, in fact, work for people. It has an equilibrium, a certain degree of homeostasis. It is what we come to know, and it is how things come to function. It's how good people who would never agree to harming or exploiting others, become part of a system that does exactly that. And not only does the system work for people, but they will also defend it. They will attack the one who threatens it. Life is far muddier than my early preparation acknowledged.

Paul, too, is well-trained and a bit of a purist. He has ideals, and he sticks to them. But even Paul has his blinders on. He has a vision for specific change and walks by other things in acceptance. For example, would he have even noticed the girl enslaved by a demon and by human handlers if the demon in her hadn't started truth-telling there in public, and then wouldn't stop?

Yes, our story in Acts is full of dysfunction from a theological and a theoretical or ethical point of view. But it works. There is a feeling that everybody is getting along. The girl knows her place, and this has become the life she knows. Her handlers are content and are making money off her situation. They can probably ease their consciences in saying that they did not make her this way. They are only making a business out of it. Why not? That is the heart of capitalism, isn't it, harnessing the market, supply and demand, utilizing the labor of others. They are just wise businessmen. The community is learning their fortunes from the girl, and that is kind of fun and useful. And everything is plodding along just fine. The jailor, who we meet as the passage progresses, is doing his job with integrity and honor, even though his livelihood is built upon the enslavement of others.

There is an order, of sorts. It is broken, and full of the fruits of sin and exploitative relationships. It is broken from a theological and theoretical or ethical point of view. Yet, no one is asking for it to change. It has its own balance. It is funny, therefore, in terms of the dynamics of the story. It starts to go crazy when the spirit in the girl starts telling the truth, in public, and loudly. The spirit in the girl is the

first to disrupt the homeostasis, and when it is disrupted, the system reacts to reestablish the equilibrium.

Furthermore, Paul doesn't even seem to respond to her out of compassion as much as annoyance. Luke writes: "But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour." He does it out of annoyance. He does a good thing though! And who would want a girl to be controlled and exploited? It is all good, right!

Wrong. This is not good. It has upset the balance. Yes, the girl might have been in a bad situation theologically or theoretically, or ethically, but no one asked Paul to intervene. All of a sudden, everything is out of balance now. The domino affect has created chaos. The demon, the only one telling the truth, mind you, is cast out. We don't hear of the voice and the future of this girl, but there are a host of questions there for her, how she is going to get by. The handlers have lost their business, or at least their cash cow. The people of the region are concerned about these rabble-rousers stirring up more trouble or unrequested changes. The politicians are concerned about public unrest. And Paul and Silas, the apostles commissioned for God's work, are now beaten and imprisoned. Wow! What a day!

Have you ever tried to do good, and in the end wished you never opened your mouth, never intervened? It interesting that the liberation brought about through the truth-telling demon, and a girl finally free of the control of both the demon and her exploitative human handlers, brings its own chaos. And nobody wants it. The handlers of the girl are upset. The community is angry. Paul and Silas are sore, bloodied, and imprisoned.

This week we had another national trauma, with 21 students and teachers bled out on the floor of an elementary school. No one wants such a thing. Who could? Like wishing for a young girl to be possessed and exploited for the benefit or entertainment or profit of others. We would never wish for such things, and yet the reaction, the system's reaction immediately moves on from the concerns about these lives to a system crisis – to those who want to make sweeping changes and those afraid of those changes. The routine *exchanges* of rehearsed arguments and attacks get lobbed back and forth. And, even while it may be tense or chaotic, notice how much changes. Nothing. Nothing changes. Our national "family system" maintains the equilibrium despite the most dramatic rupture, 21, mostly children, bleeding out on a school room floor.

A few years ago, we were doing our morning drop-offs. Abby got out at her Middle school, and Hudson rattled off his parting blessings from the back seat: "love ya, have a good day, Abby, don't get shot." We never really talked about such things at home. But Hudson clearly absorbed it. When Sandy Hook happened,

Abby was one year older than those kids. But knowing that there are so many complex aspects to the problem of mass shootings that our nation doesn't seem interested nor capable of addressing, we knew it would continue, and we parents would continue to hope it just doesn't happen at our kids' school the next time, or that the shooter comes in on the opposite end of the building. Because it would continue. The system would not allow such stressors to upset the balance too severely.

Well in our Acts story, there are more stressors that continue to upset the balance. And these stressors will be such that the system will not be able to contain it all.

Our story about this girl healed quickly flows into another story which includes an earthquake. Earthquakes are not uncommon in that region, but typically, at least in antiquity, understood in cosmic perspective. The gods are judging. An earthquake happens, the jail where Paul and Silas are in shackles crumbles, and now another person's life is unraveling: the jailer. He, in pride and honor, sees his charge in shambles, and by no fault of his own, he has failed to contain the prisoners. The equilibrium has been disrupted so severely that he sees no way forward. Culturally, he understands that he has no other option in light of the circumstances than to end his own life, to turn the shame of it on himself, and to go out with an ounce of honor.

But Paul stops him. Paul will lead him to a new order that does not necessitate him ending his own life. The standard rules governing the jailor's world have been broken. His responsibilities are impossible to keep at this point. Furthermore, he doesn't know what to expect or think anymore.

His world is disrupted, things have gone wonky. He has always operated on the assumptions that if given the opportunity, prisoners will run. They won't stay. And that prisoners will be angry and difficult. But Paul and Silas are buoyant even while sore and imprisoned, singing hymns and praises even before the earthquake. And now in the wake of the quake, they have gathered a rather calm congregation of prisoners who have not run. The Jailor was not trained for this.

What does he do when the prisoners don't run, don't even feel threatened, don't even recognize him as having any power over them? It is presented in a way that those who did not run contribute to the preservation and re-configuration of the jailor's life. But perhaps they too needed time to imagine what their lives are now, without the past oppressive structures, not unlike the slave-girl imagining a life beyond being controlled by others. Can a new level of stasis be found?

Edwin Friedman, who wrote the book on Family systems theory for the church, argues that the goal of leadership is to raise the health of the system's homeostasis,

to improve the health of the system through communication, self-differentiation, addressing triangulation, and so on – to improve the health of the system so that the system will then defend and maintain that new stasis. Paul, in a sense, is helping the jailor and all those with their shackles falling off, to imagine a new stasis, a new system, a new equilibrium, one that is extremely foreign, threatening, and strange in the immediate. Paul is advocating for more dramatic change than Friedman would ever advise. But he is promoting a new balance, a new paradigm. And those standing around in the rubble will have to decide whether to be a part of that new stasis, or to revert to rebuilding the old.

“The Jailor” begins his life anew in that moment, surrendering to a new system, a new stasis, good news. He seeks baptism, for he and his household. He seeks a new beginning in the ritual and symbolic waters of baptism, death and new life. He acknowledges the brokenness of life, goes down into the waters, and is raised to new life, seeking the redemptive and healing potential of the gospel on his life and those around him—re-ordering the world that once made sense for him. And after baptism, he hosts a meal with Paul and Silas. It is the same response and that Lydia showed immediately preceding our reading. It seems to be the paradigm. A baptism, a meal, and new relationships forming as they discover a new way, a new stasis.

You see, for all the focus on good news, and repentance and change, on seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all this stuff we talk about here in this sanctuary, it tends to be more complicated than we always acknowledge. And because we function in systems, often systems do not want us to change, nor want us to change things around us. So, it can be hard to figure all this out. And to some degree, the gospel brings a little chaos, inviting us to a different stasis, a different order, a different equilibrium.

As our passage demonstrates, to free one person, to give them forgiveness and wholeness and agency, is to alter the whole system. Everything goes crazy, and often the system tries to stop it.

Now the part of the story we don’t get information on, that I really would like to hear about, is what happens after. I’m thinking of this new community of former-prisoners and former-jailors and former-slaves and those used to be possessed by a spirit. I’m thinking of all these characters being baptized and joining the meal and committing to a new direction. I wonder how easily that all went. I wonder what it was like for them to acknowledge the brokenness of the world they have known, but to no longer defend it, or try to restore it, but to be willing to be re-made and to re-enter this world with something new to offer--freedom, not just in name only, but the ability to become oneself and to not have to run, or be determined and dictated by every impulse going on around you.

It's hard to imagine sometimes, how a broken order can be re-made. Because sometimes the brokenness feels orderly, and the newness feels disorderly. But may God give us the wisdom and grace to move closer to the place where the chaos that comes from a freed girl and from an earthquake that brings structures down, can open the way for hope, for a re-ordered life according to the gospel. And like Lydia, and like this Jailer, may we give ourselves to the church, to a baptism and all that it symbolizes, and a table forgiveness and fellowship.

Paul and Silas in Prison

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order 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 making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” ³¹ They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.