

That They May All Be One

Acts 16:16-34, John 17:20-26

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“What must I do to be saved?” This is a pivotal question asked by the jailor in our story from the Book of Acts. I would venture to say that the answer to this question has to do with trusting and learning to live out of Jesus’ vision that we can actually experience or at least glimpse that “all may be one.” “That all may be one” is actually the defining scripture text and motto for the United (and uniting) Church of Christ. We yearn to be one with God and each other as Christ is one with the Father/Mother/Creator and the Holy Spirit. I realize that it may seem like a naïve proposition to even consider that we might be or live as one in our world. Think of our collective inability to address climate change globally while destructive storms, floods and other such events are on the rise. Add to this devastating evidence of the extinction of countless species. We seem to think of nature as something out there rather than being part of it, sacredly imbued with and emanating from God. Look around at the nationalist (and exclusive) fervor growing abroad and at home with more and more “strong men” ruling with narrow interests and by manipulative means.¹ We can probably each name ways in which we are currently not at one with someone close to us or in our wider community.

In the face of all this (and more) we hear in John’s Gospel how Jesus is calling on the “Father” to draw people together into deeper oneness and identification with the ground of all being we call God. We are challenged to ask ourselves whether we will dare to take this call to oneness seriously in our own lives. Let us turn to the Book of Acts for an intriguing story in which we see such oneness lived out as well as evidence of blind spots. Our story for today starts with the blind spot without noticing it.

Paul and Silas are probably in the city of Philippi (Greece). It is a Gentile, not a Jewish city, under Roman law. The religious practices and cultural customs are quite different from the world Paul and Silas come from. Among other things, people are practicing

¹ The Austrian government just collapsed over a scandal involving a high ranking official who was blatantly abusing his position for personal gain.

divination and worshipping a variety of Gods. Paul notices a young slave woman who is making money for her owners by fortune-telling. She actually recognizes the power invested in the apostles and tells the crowd, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She keeps repeating this message for days. Here is one slave recognizing another but her slave hood is of quite different origin than that of Paul and Silas. She is “owned” by greedy people who misuse her gifts of intuition for profit. Paul and Silas are servants of the living God, bound to tell the good news of Christ no matter what it costs them.

Paul gets totally annoyed with her and eventually exorcizes what is presumed to be an evil spirit. I must admit that I find the depiction of Paul’s response to her actually harsh, sad, and dismissive. Her ability to see and name who Paul and Silas really are and how God is doing the work of healing through them, actually speaks to her gifts of insight and intuition. Perhaps Paul just did not want her to be the source of having attention drawn to him and Silas. The long and short of it is that this woman gets used and dismissed by all the people around her. There is no hint of oneness here.²

The slave owners promptly accuse Paul and Silas of being Jews who advocate unlawful beliefs and practices although the slave owners’ true motif is the fear of losing profit. Their accusations lead to harsh physical punishment and jail for Paul and Silas. They get locked away in the innermost cell of the jail and even have their feet secured in stocks. All these details suggest that there should be no way they could be freed. They pray and sing to God in the middle of the night. They are singing to themselves, to God, but also to the prisoners who are listening intently. Suddenly, a huge earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison, opens all the doors and unfastens prisoners’ chains. Amazingly, this earthquake doesn’t just benefit Paul and Silas. It sets everyone free.

² I suppose we might give Paul and Silas the benefit of the doubt that they might have reached out to her further had they not been accosted by the people who felt their lucrative source of income had been compromised. However, I remain unconvinced.

In the darkness, Paul observes that the jailor is about to take his life because he assumes that everyone has escaped and that he will be held accountable. Amazingly, none of the prisoners leave. Paul won't leave the jailor to fend for himself. Paul shouts, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." Rather than remain in the real and proverbial dark, the jailor calls for lights and then falls on his knees. Whatever offers of a new life God is making through this earthquake, it also remarkably includes the guy who has the keys to the jail. As far as Paul and Silas are concerned, he is as much in need of God's salvation as every inmate regardless of what brought them to jail - whether it was murder or the kinds of false accusations brought against the disciples. When it comes to God offering newness of life and our need for a deeper understanding of God's grace, there are no exceptions. We are all in need of grace and we are all welcome to receive it.

I suppose witnessing an earthquake that undoes the chains of prisoners in your care and not having them take off on you is a pretty powerful wake-up call. The jailor gets it. He asks, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul tells him that faith in Christ will suffice. Faith in Christ equates faith in a God who will not abandon those in prison. God will also not simply abandon those who stand in the way of healing and recovery or collude with forces of injustice. The jailor immediately invites Paul and Silas to his home and his entire family is baptized. True to the times, we don't know if that is only via patriarchal fiat from or if they had a say in it. Positively speaking, the story reminds us that God allows those who open their hearts to a new life and community in the body of Christ. They can become hosts and find a new sense of dignity and purpose (see also Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10). We also don't really know what happened to the inmates but are invited to trust that their lives could not be the same after the experience of that night.³ At a deep existential level none of us are free until all of us are free because we are at

³ We do know that Paul and Silas are eventually let go by the magistrates because they are actually Roman citizens and should not have been jailed in the first place. I suppose we could see that as negating the power of story. We could say that they did not have as much to lose by staying as one might have thought but Paul remains free and claimed by Christ regardless of his circumstance which will include further arrests, incarceration and execution.

the deepest level of our existence truly one. There is the intriguing sense of a deeper freedom that sustains Paul whether he is inside or outside of a prison. His faith demands of him not to abandon even those who seek to harm him. To love out of such a sense of belonging is a measure of living a saved/healed life.

Sadly, the woman at the beginning of the story did not get to taste the fruits of such care. This is a painful reminder that we can also be blind to seeing where and how people are suffering from injustice. You may have just seen the news that Canada is trying to face up to the murder and disappearance of at minimum 1200 indigenous women and girls since 1980. Recent reports on the massive scale of torture in Syrian prisons (over 160,000) are egregious examples of this. Women are thrown in jail for their activism in Saudi Arabia. People of color are still far more likely to be convicted and land in jail for the same offenses than whites in this country.

We are also witnessing how humanitarian helpers like Teresa Todd are increasingly under investigation or in jail for helping migrants who are fleeing violence and persecution in their home countries.⁴ Todd responded to young people flagging down her car on a Texas country road to get help for one of them who was in dire medical distress. An official at Guantanamo lost his job for asking how to take care of the elderly and increasingly frail inmates no one wants or seems to care about. The President has recently called for charging fees before being able to ask for asylum rather than addressing the deeper issues of violence, injustice and inequality in our world.

We have to ask ourselves - are we somehow strangely imprisoning ourselves with our fears and divisions? Jesus and Paul are telling us that oneness is not only an experience of what God can do but of who God is and the life God calls us to live. This includes all who suffer and all who cause and collude in suffering that no one need harm

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2019/05/28/725716169/extending-zero-tolerance-to-people-who-help-migrants-along-the-border>

themselves. Let us seek the liberation of all who face injustice and all who need healing from wrong-doing. Let us pray this week for the humility to see and act upon our own blind spots and contradictions. Let us give thanks and praise to God who tells us in and through Christ, "I am with you. I have hope for you. I will give you my all that you may all be one." Amen.