

May 12, 2013
7th Sunday of Easter
Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

“Shake It Up”

Acts 16:16-34 John 17:18-26

Next week is Pentecost, and we will begin the season of the Spirit. For many it could be a puzzling and discomfiting season. I think most of us feel more comfortable relating to God the Father and Creator or God the Son because at least we have concepts and terminology which we can use to help us in our understanding. I’ve been both a father and a son. But the Holy Spirit? What is that? I have no personal experience to relate here in my ordinary life.

According to the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit is the divine principle of activity in the world. Of course in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is the spirit of Jesus, sent to be God’s presence with us after Jesus left this physical world. The church has come to understand Holy Spirit to be the third person in the Christian Trinity. Ok, I know all this, but it’s just information; I can’t really connect with it in a meaningful, personal way.

To help us here, let’s take another look at the story from Acts about Paul and Silas to see if it can give us a better clue. Paul and Silas had arrived in Philippi – this was one of Paul’s missionary journeys – and were looking for the place of worship when a young slave girl spotted them. This girl could tell fortunes, and by doing so made a great deal of money for her owners. She took one look at Paul and Silas and started yelling, “*These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.*”¹ Apparently this was pretty annoying. She followed them everywhere they went shouting this same thing, not just for hours but for days!

Paul and Silas were embarrassed and annoyed. What’s was the big deal? Well according to Jewish law – and remember, the Old Testament was the only Bible Paul knew – a medium or fortune teller was a major sinner; a very disreputable person, to say the least. Here was the town fortune teller running around shouting out their qualifications, like she was their sponsor!²

Paul “heals” the girl. Meaning, in this case, that she lost that pesky ability to go into a trance, hear voices and see the future.

Remember, the girl was a slave, this “healing” didn’t set well with her owners, because this peculiarity in her personality provided them with income. So they reported Paul and Silas. We aren’t told what the crime was, but it was enough to get them arrested, stripped and beaten and sent off to jail.

I have a lot of questions about this passage. We know Timothy was with Paul and Silas on this trip, but the Book of Acts was written by the evangelist, Luke, of course, so most likely it

¹ Acts 16:17

² [Leviticus 20:27](#): ²⁷“A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.” [Exodus 22:18](#): ¹⁸“Do not allow a sorceress to live. [Deuteronomy 13:5](#): ⁵That prophet or dreamer must be put to death

is Luke who is narrating here. In the first part of the chapter he writes in the first person: “*We were going to a place of prayer.*”

I think it’s fascinating that the story is being told here as a first-hand account. But when we come to the “getting arrested, beaten and thrown in jail” part, the story suddenly is back in the third person. Somehow Timothy and Luke managed to avoid getting arrested; but no explanation is given.

Maybe even more interesting is that this is one of those rare cases in the New Testament where someone is healed *without asking for healing*. You may remember that Jesus healed a man blind from birth without being asked to do so. Here Paul heals the slave girl. In both cases big trouble resulted, including trouble for the person being healed.

After the beating, Paul and Silas were turned over to the jailer who locked them in an inner cell after securing their feet in stocks.

Okay, stop right here for a minute.

After the beating... If you saw Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ” you remember what Roman beatings could be like.

Locked in an inner cell... Now think about what an “inner cell” might mean in a prison made of stone. Dark, with filth and vermin you couldn’t even see.

Roman “prisons” like this one in Philippi were not used to incarcerate condemned criminals as punishment after trial, but were really more like jails – holding tanks for accused persons *still awaiting trial*. The beating Paul and Silas received was not necessarily punishment for their crime; Roman prisoners were routinely mistreated and beaten.

Roman prisons normally did not provide anything. In order for prisoners to survive, family members or friends had to bring them food, clothing, blankets, medicine, and other necessities. Remember, the two had been stripped for the beating, and may still have been without clothes.

They were placed in stocks. So they were beaten, chained in darkness and filth without any reason to believe they would be unchained from the stocks any time soon. It would have been nearly impossible to sleep; stocks are designed to keep you uncomfortable. Many a prisoner in a Roman jail died from starvation or exposure before ever going to trial.

In spite of all this, they were in good spirits! Why weren’t they depressed and full of fear? Yes, they were dedicated to their mission goal of telling people about God’s transforming love in Jesus Christ. Yes, they knew they had friends “outside” – Luke and Silas – who would certainly provide them with clothing, blankets and food. Even so, by anybody’s standards this had to be considered a pretty tough day. We would expect them to be bitter and angry and dispirited. But no! Paul and Silas are sitting there in the dark, stinky prison, the blood not even dry yet on their beaten bodies; and they are singing!

This is our real clue about the Holy Spirit. Not the miracle of the girl being healed; not the miracle of the earthquake shaking up the jail and breaking all the chains; the great miracle here is how the Holy Spirit’s presence somehow enabled Paul and Silas to be undaunted by the most horrible, discouraging, tortuous, unjust experience imaginable. What they were going through should have been beyond human endurance. But with the Holy Spirit’s presence they not only endured but flourished joyfully!

So this text speaks to one of the most difficult theological questions: “*Why do bad things happen to good people?*” or “*Where is God when I am suffering?*” or, “*How can evil exist if God is all-good and all-powerful?*” We don’t get easy answers to these questions, but in this

text we see good people suffering unjustly, yet they are not defeated. We see terrible things happening to Paul and Silas, yet they manage to turn the bad to good; to use their suffering in a positive way.

Where is God in their suffering? *With them*, feeling their pain, encouraging them, giving them strength and hope and direction. This is the wondrous truth of the Holy Spirit.

When we look back at Paul and Silas and the Early Church, we see that the world was changed because of their faith, their witness, their enthusiasm, their love and their tenacity. We have a tendency to think they must have been super-human. But we know *we're* not. So we wonder how Christ's church will ever survive, how the First Presbyterian Church of Medford will survive if it is left to the likes of us.

Of course, it won't, if we depend only upon ourselves. But what if we are willing to step off the smooth path we want for our lives onto the rough, shaky places, opening the way for God's Spirit to enter our lives? What if we take a look at all our difficulties and challenges and seeming failures and fall back into the arms of God, singing hymns of joy and trusting in the leading of God's Spirit? What miracles do you think might happen? What might our future be? Like Paul and Silas sitting in the dark prison, we just might be surprised at what God will provide.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.