



## Hold The Note

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field  
The Seventh Sunday of Easter ~ June 2, 2019*

### Acts 16:16-34

With Paul and Silas, we came to Philippi of Macedonia, a Roman colony, and 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. 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." 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. 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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 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. 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. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 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.

### Psalm 97

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| 1 You reign, O God; let the earth rejoice; *<br>let the multitude of the isles be glad.                          | and delight in false gods! *<br>Let all gods bow down before you.  |
| 2 Clouds and darkness are round about you; *<br>righteousness and justice are the foundations<br>of your throne. | 8 Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice, *<br>because of your judgments, O God.                            |
| 3 A fire goes before you *<br>and burns up your enemies on every side.   | 9 For you are God, most high over all the earth; *<br>you are exalted far above all gods.                                    |
| 4 Your lightnings light up the world; *<br>the earth sees it and is afraid.                                      | 10 You love those who hate evil; *<br>you preserve the lives of your saints<br>and deliver them from the hand of the wicked. |
| 5 The mountains melt like wax at your presence, O God, *<br>at your presence, O God of the whole earth.          | 11 Light has sprung up for the righteous *<br>and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.                             |
| 6 The heavens declare your righteousness, *<br>and all the peoples see your glory.                               | 12 Rejoice in God, you righteous, *<br>and give thanks to God's holy Name.   |
| 7 Confounded be all who worship carved images  |  |

### Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

"See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work. I am the Alpha and the

Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.” The Spirit and the bride say, “Come.” And let every one who hears say, “Come.” And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. The one who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

### **John 17:20-26**

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

I have been musing a lot about the power of song lately—having recently been at the Festival of Homiletics, hearing a lot of knock your socks off preaching and powerfully uplifting worship—I was reminded again deep in my bones how songs can quickly transform a soul, transform a room. How songs have been at the heart of the Christian story and of every movement grounded in the justice of God, starting with Miriam’s song after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, from the psalm Jesus sang on the night before he died, all the way up to the songs associated with the Civil Rights movement: (Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me around, I’m gonna keep on walking, keep on talkin, marching down to freedom land).

As our story from Acts starts this morning, Paul and Silas are traveling to the Greek city of Philippi, spreading the Gospel. They soon find themselves trailed by an enslaved girl possessed by a spirit that gives her the ability to see the unknown and that has caused her to be the object of exploitation. Her owners have a good gig—they send her out to the square and people give her money to tell their fortune and they get to keep all the money she earns. Paul gets more and more irritated by this constant loud presence and, after a few days, uses the power given to him by Jesus to drive the spirit out of her. Now you might think this would be good news—and it likely was for the girl, but definitely not for her owners. They are outraged by this healing. Why? Simply that Paul and Silas have gotten in the way of their profits, threatened their economic system. The outrage then was as predictable as now. If you do anything to threaten the profits of those in power you are going to be stopped by any means necessary. So the owners employ an age old strategy, rather than talk about the real reason for their anger, their financial self-interest, they veil their concern in the language of nation, race, and tradition. Language with which we are all too familiar—that we hear and use all the time. National leaders and corporate executives use the same language and logic today to resist doing anything about the spirits that hold us, hold our nation, hostage—hostage to profits and to the exploitation of the expendable. When the owners of the slave girl realized their hope of making money was gone they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them to the marketplace to face the authorities.

As an aside here I always wonder about those who are “throw away” characters in the text. The story does not tell us what happens to the girl. What happens when she no longer serves a purpose for her owners. The writer of Acts didn’t think it was important information. And I can’t creatively fill in any blanks. I can just note that we should always keep an eye out for the expendable ones—in any story we should always look for the girl.

The Bible tells us that Paul and Silas were dragged before the magistrates—and those who were turning them in said, “these men are Jews and they are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating for customs unlawful for Romans to practice or accept”. It is language of race, nation, and tradition. Language designed to provoke an “us” against “them” response from the magistrates and the crowd. And it worked. The crowd howled for Paul and Silas to be punished. They were disruptive, outsiders, they were disconcerting, threatening, and deeply unsettling people of faith. A threat to profits and power. They were not practicing a tame and domesticated faith that tries to protect itself—that aligns with nation and empire. Not faith toned down to fit worldly categories and tucked into moral, philosophical, and political preferences. Theirs was not, as the Rev. Traci Blackmon says, a left leaning faith, or a right leaning faith, theirs was GOSPEL faith. Faith that shakes the world and challenges its authorities. The truth is that the crowd and magistrates were not wrong. Paul and Silas were a threat to their world because the Gospel is a threat to the world of Empire.

The question that haunts me is, what about me, am I a threat? What about us? It seems we may have been lulled into believing that faith can be lived quietly in a world where Empire, profit, exploitation, reign. I worry that the church wants to assure people that we Christians can fit in, that our faith does not preclude our participation in the workings of Empire. I worry that I, that we, worry more about making it than being faithful Christians. I worry that I have, that we have, what Rev. Traci Blackmon calls a room temperature religion. That the fire of our faith is fading fast.

At the same time I think, I know, that with God, there is always another chance, a chance to reclaim the revolutionary nature of our faith. The problem is that if we do that, we like Paul and Silas will be viewed as threatening by the world around us. We will be viewed as enemies. When the orders that called the National Guard to Ferguson, Missouri to squash the protests against the killing of Michael Brown were made public, it was discovered that they named the preachers and protestors as “enemies” of the US. Enemies because they had an allegiance to something other than the party line of the power of Empire and had become offensive to the world around them. Like Paul and Silas, the preachers and protestors who were proclaiming that black lives matter had become “them” and not “us”. Our world, like Paul’s, is a world of them and us. A world that profits from division and exploitation. Exploitation of women—you don’t have to look overseas to find it. exploitation of the poor. Exploitation of black and brown people. Of LGBTQIA people. Of those who migrate or seek refuge here.

I can't help but wonder what might happen if the church, the body of Christ, was to start effectively, collectively, and publicly proclaiming and more importantly enacting a Gospel that said everybody, every single blessed life, is important to God? What would happen if our faith caught fire? Of course I don't really need to wonder. I know what would happen. We would be under attack—maybe it should concern us that we are not. Paul and Silas did not end up in prison for towing the line, they got there because they were, the Good News of Jesus Christ is, a threat to the world as it was ordered, a threat to power. They did not end up there by advocating a watered down, domesticated moral vision, but for driving out a spirit that was holding a girl hostage and thus disrupting a system that profits on exploitation. They threatened power. And the inevitable result is violence. Violence is always used to protect profits and power. And the crowd hewed and hews the party line. For Paul and Silas there is no trial, they are simply beaten, stripped, thrown into an innermost cell and shackled to the wall.

BUT...about midnight...the Bible tells us Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns. And I can't imagine they were whispered songs but loud, strong hymns of faith, deliverance, freedom. "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around". Songs sung while shackled to the wall with no idea if they would be executed the next day or if they were going to spend the rest of their lives in prison. "Gonna keep on walking, keep on talking, marching down to freedom land". Their singing was not based on knowledge of a happy outcome. It was based on the certain knowledge of the power of the Good News of Jesus Christ, of a good, just, compassionate, freedom loving, ever present God.

This is the faith to which we are called. A faith preached and proclaimed with power. That calls us to accountability with the least of these. A faith that, if we are doing it right, will mean we are deemed threatening, to the world. And a faith that sustains us through it all. Paul and Silas may have been locked in prison but they did not allow their spirits to be imprisoned. They knew that as long as they kept on singing they would be freer than those who accept the way things are. The text says it was an earthquake that threw the prison doors open but I have a sneaking hunch it was nothing less than the presence of God that filled the place and burst the doors to freedom open. And through it all Paul and Silas kept singing—they held the note.

But as anyone who sings knows, it takes strength and endurance. Sometimes notes have to be held for a long long time. But the good thing is that when you sing as a group, when one of us gets tired and has to drop out, somebody else holds the note. You may not be the strongest voice but when someone else needs to take a breath you may have the energy to hold the note.

And we need that strength now. There are so many people being exploited, our system is so broken, so stuck in death—dealing that it can feel overwhelming. Exhausting. Daunting. And yet, we must sing. We must hold the note. Hold the note until refugees are treated with dignity and respect, hold the note until our prison system is reformed, hold the note until the poor are no longer exploited, hold the note until we live as if all lives matter to God. The song is now ours. We must pick it up from generation to generation and hold the note until everybody is free.