

Easter 7, Yr. C,
June 2, 2019
Acts 16:16-34, John 17:20-26

I don't know if you would agree but, for me, the connection between the first reading and the gospel wasn't immediately obvious. It took some doing, but I finally discovered a link. I'd like us to think about imprisonment, and all the ways humans can be imprisoned, and then to compare that with the kind of freedom we can have if we can allow ourselves to trust that deep connection to God and Christ that John talks about in the Gospel. That Gospel is part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples and, at first glance, the language is a bit convoluted: You, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they be in us...so that they may be one as we are one. So unity, oneness with God and Christ. This is illustrated in a different part of John's gospel when he talks about the vine and the branches – that connection to the source of life. What Jesus is talking about is the recognition that we are intimately connected with God. So intimately connected that that connection shapes everything for us. While that might sound a bit esoteric, we already have experience of that on the human level. Most of us have been blessed to have relationships with spouses or children or parents, in which the connection is so profound, so deep, as to shape our lives. And while we have a glimpse of that in our personal relationships, it's much more difficult to imagine that kind of unity when we start extending it. Obviously, our relationships and obligations change as they extend further out, but today's Gospel reminds us that the fundamental relationship, the fact that we are all one in Christ, doesn't change. We're reminded of that, I think, every time we say the Lord's prayer and begin with OUR father; it's never MY Father. Fortunately for us, Jesus is praying for his disciples but also, as the text says, "on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." That's us.

The unity Christ wants for us is a unity in love. And it has a purpose, which is to witness to God's love and to authenticate Christ's message. The text again: "So that the world will know, Father, that you have sent me and that you have loved them," Jesus says. It's no surprise that the church hasn't always done the best job with this. John Chrysostom, writing in the early years of the church, said that quarreling disciples led non-Christians to hold the opinion that these people couldn't possibly be followers of the god of peace, given their behavior. Jesus' followers have often been tempted and are still tempted today, to tear each other apart over theological formulations – seemingly concerned about outdoing one another in the proper articulation of what they believe rather than how deeply and widely they could love. What if the same energy went into the command to love? How different the history of Christianity would be if the competition had been around that! Who could be the greatest lover!

Oneness in love can seem like an impossible dream. But both scientists and spiritual writers tell us that we have it backwards – the dream is that we are separate; the reality

is that we're connected. Thomas Merton, writing about this, in an essay titled, "The Body of Broken Bones," which, truth be told is often how we experience the world as well as the Body of Christ, says this: "The goal is for us all to be united in love, to recognize that every human being has the same nature, the same needs, and is made in the image of God." But the reality, he reminds us is quite otherwise – the ongoing temptation is to treat the other as a stranger to be feared, or as an object to be used and manipulated for my own ends and desires, thinking that I alone am the human being here and everyone else is something lesser, an animal or a piece of furniture, here for my convenience and my use.

And that's the perfect lead-in to the reading from Acts. Great story, although it leaves a number of questions unanswered – like why did Paul act so slowly and seemingly only out of annoyance. Or, what happened to the slave girl when she lost her credibility and therefore her livelihood. Nothing good you can bet.

A word about context here. In ancient times, insanity was considered a gift from the gods. The thought was that since the person had no mind of their own, they could be used by the gods as channels for the gods' messages. Hence her ability to tell fortunes. Clearly, she's not free. Interestingly, she's going around after Paul and Silas, shouting that they too are slaves, slaves of the most high God. As I noted, this went on for some time until Paul gets annoyed and casts out the spirit, curing the girl, freeing her from the illness, but also destroying her value to her owners.

I'd like to use that story to look at all the various ways in which people can be and are imprisoned. The slave girl was imprisoned by her owners. But the owners are also enslaved; in their case, it's by their greed. They incite a mob and have Paul and Silas thrown into jail – physical imprisonment. But it's interesting to note that Paul's behavior here. He says nothing about the abuse of the girl, nothing about slavery. This is the same writer who wrote so beautifully about equality – trying to break down the walls of separation. Remember his words that there was no separation, no inequality between slave and free, man and woman, Jew and Gentile. But he's also a man of his times, imprisoned, if you will, by his patriarchal culture and world view

It's the idea of the movement from imprisonment to the freedom that we can find in the love of God that I would like us to think about. I'm thinking of imprisonment in the sense of all the ways in which we are kept from becoming the people God wants us to be – those great lovers. It can be physical – some people are imprisoned by poverty or by ignorance or by illness. But I think most often we can get caught, imprisoned if you will, by other stuff: by greed, like the owners of the slave girl, by the prevalent ideas of the culture, like Paul, but also by fear and resentment and envy, or maybe it's sorrow, or loneliness – whatever catches us and keep us entrapped in self-interest and unable to reach out to others in love.

A number of people are thinking and writing about this because it has become a pressing social and political problem, to say nothing of a spiritual problem. One of the courses at Bjorklunden this summer is titled: WE DON'T HATE EACH OTHER AS MUCH AS YOU THINK. I'm taking the course; it should be interesting. Ben Sasse, one of the senators from Nebraska, has written a book titled *THEM*. He begins the book by talking about growing up in a small town in Nebraska, where people knew each other and cared about each other and where everyone came together for town events, especially, he remembers, the high school football games. There was a sense of community; that they belonged together in spite of differences, whether religious, political, or ethnic. And then he talks about living for a while in Chicago during a heat wave where 400 people were known to have died but hundreds more were discovered later; no one knew about them so no one even looked in on them. His thesis is that humans need to belong, need to be connected. And if they aren't connected in a positive way by a loving community, they turn instead to negative connections – they find community with groups who share common enemies – anything to be part of a team. America wants you to be happy, he says, but more urgently, American needs you to love your neighbor and connect with your community. Not quite the same message as John's, but similar.

But let me finish on a bright note. Last Thursday, several of us hosted the St. Luke's birthday party for the residents of the care center at Scandia. There was a good crowd (in fact we finished off half a sheet cake and could have used more!) with cake, ice cream, presents and music. Towards the end of the afternoon, several of us were sitting near the back of the room and a woman that I hadn't previously met came over and struck up a conversation. She was a resident of the assisted living part of Scandia. She was in a wheel chair and was attached to oxygen. So, in a way, physically imprisoned – and I would note that she could have been emotionally imprisoned as well – in depression and negativity. Instead she started telling me about her own ministry that she was operating from her small space. When she could, she said, she got to the Dollar Store in Sturgeon Bay and there she could buy greeting cards for 50 cents each. She had a stockpile, she said, as it was getting harder to get there. What she did was to keep up a continual connection through correspondence, sending birthday cards, get well cards, sympathy cards, thank you cards, thinking of you cards. It was important, she said, for people to know they were connected and that someone cared. And then she went on to tell me that she had developed a single sentence philosophy – 10 words, she said, and each word has only 2 letters. Here it is: IF IT IS TO BE, IT IS UP TO ME. It's a perfect example of those small acts we talked about last week, one small act at a time, healing a fractured universe. Who knows how many people she touched and how many days she brightened, reminding people that they weren't forgotten, but were connected in love. Amen.

