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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
5/8/2016, The Seventh Sunday of Easter  
Acts 16:16-34

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text is from our First Lesson, Acts 16. Traditionally, this text is understood to come from the pen of St. Luke, who was one of St. Paul's missionary companions. St. Luke writes in the first person plural, we. It is a text that speaks of a sad situation. It speaks of a girl doubly enslaved: enslaved to her owners and enslaved to a demon:

<sup>16</sup>As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. (Acts 16:16, RSV)

As long as we live, we are free to walk the path our Maker lays before us. That is what it means to be a human being. You and I are free to obey the Lord. No matter how refined science should become in *predicting* human behavior, you and I remain free to depart from the prediction in order to walk with the Lord. Science and market research can predict us as finely as they will, and yet we are free to go merrily on our way in the direction of holiness of life. For that is what it means to be made in the image of God. We are free for obedience to our Maker and we ought to *consider* ourselves to be free in that good way as long as we live.

And yet, the Bible speaks of demons and spirits. When a demon is in charge, it is as if the humanity of the person has been stripped away. Later in this morning's story, we will find the apostles Paul and Silas in stocks in the jail. It is a pitiful sight to imagine. But pity even more the slave girl in this story. She does not sit behind bars and in stocks, and yet her dungeon is even darker. Paul and Silas in their stocks are still free to pray and to sing praises to the Lord, but this slave girl is not free. She is bound to her masters, yes, but even worse, she is possessed by a spirit. Note that when Jesus or an apostle casts out a demon, they do not even address the person himself, the person herself. Rather they command the demon to be gone! It is as if they cannot even reach the person herself until the demon be removed. She looks like a human being, and surely she *is* a human being, and yet she is a human being not yet in her right mind, not yet in her right spirit, because she is controlled by a demon. I hate the very thought of a demon. In fact, I rush to make this pastoral point to you, my friends: You are *not* under the control of a demon. There might be all kinds of spirits swirling around in your soul — good spirits and bad ones, loving spirits and angry ones — but you are not possessed by a demon. The living Jesus will not tolerate spirits to so claim you. He died for you, he loves you so much, and so he is not going to abandon you to some false spirit.

You always have some freedom, some path forward by which you can reclaim your good mind, your good spirit, your good way of life.

But not this poor girl in the Bible story. Like other cases of demon-possession in the Bible, this slave-girl is helpless until Jesus or an apostle casts out the demon that is ruining her life. In this particular case, the slave girl has what the Bible calls “a spirit of divination.” It made her call out things. Interestingly, it made her call out *true* things. Her masters liked that fact about her. It made them profit. I imagine that they charged people good money to hear the girl call out true things for the customers. A carnival act. Her masters did not try to make her better. They did not entrust her to some gentle people who might have had some success in calming down the demon. But her masters did not want her better. They simply wanted money. Their cruel hearts are revealed when Paul casts out the demon, and rather than rejoice that the girl is free of the demon, they are furious and drag the apostles before the court, which in turn casts the apostles into the jail.

But back at the start of the story, the girl is still possessed by the demon and so she calls out things about the apostles. What she cries about the apostles is perfectly true:

“These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” (Acts 16:17, RSV)

It annoyed St. Paul. I take some comfort in this little remark in the Bible. It seems that even an apostle, even a saint, can become annoyed. And so we read this about the slave girl calling out her message about the apostles:

<sup>18</sup>And this she did for many days. But Paul was *annoyed*, and turned and said to the spirit, “I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. (Acts 16:18, RSV)

Why was St. Paul annoyed? I like to imagine that he was annoyed simply because it is unworthy of a human being to be under the control of a demon. You get the picture about this poor girl that she was *compelled* to call out the truth about the apostles. And she was compelled, not out of love of the truth, but because she was controlled by her spirit of divination. She was, as it were, a little sailboat being pushed along by a gale. That the gale made her call out the truth does not matter. It is simply not right for a human being to be pushed along in that manner. We are free. We must be free. We cannot live as human beings made in the image of God if we are not free to move along the path he lays before us. That path might be a very narrow path. As we become older and more frail, the actual number of options before us might become fewer and fewer. But within those few options, we always retain the freedom to turn away from sin and toward God. Even the prisoner in the darkest dungeon has the freedom to pray and perhaps even to sing hymns to God.

And that is precisely what Paul and Silas end up doing in this story. These two are arrested by the magistrates, upon complaint by the owners of the slave girl. They are arrested, tried, beaten with many stripes, and cast into jail, with strict orders to the jailer to keep them secure. But, with their feet in the stocks in a midnight jail, Paul and Silas are found praying and singing hymns to God. They have strong spirits — spirits that cannot be broken by the magistrates, nor by the jailer. The poor slave girl had a strong spirit too, only it was not *her* spirit. It was the spirit of divination within her. It is when St. Paul throws that spirit out of her that she has a chance to shine forth as a free human being.

This morning's story in Acts 16 is a story about spirits — some of them good, some of them bad. We've already mentioned the slave girl and the good news that her demon was cast out. But there are other spirits on display in this story — a whole welter of them. The owners of the slave girl, for example, have given in to a spirit of greed. It has made them careless of the girl's welfare. Indeed, their greed has made them cruel.

The magistrates are too much under the influence of a spirit of accommodation. It causes them to be unjust in their duties. The owners of the slave girl bring the apostles to the magistrates, disguising their true motives. The owners are mad because the casting out of the demon means that they have lost their profit. But they do not speak of this. Instead, they complain that Paul and Silas are Jews teaching unfamiliar things:

These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. <sup>21</sup>They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice. (Acts 16:20-21)

So, that is the charge. But the magistrates do not investigate the truth of this charge. They do not give the apostles legal standing to defend themselves and to answer the charge. They do not render official judgment, but rather command that the apostles are to be stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail. These magistrates probably slap each other on the back, go out and have a beer, and congratulate themselves are how clever they were to yield to the complaints of the slave-girl owners and the crowd.

As it turns out, they get in trouble because of their willingness to conform to the cries of the people rather than to stand up for justice. It is rather satisfying to imagine the scene. The Lord has broken open the jail and released the chains from the prisoners. But Paul and Silas do not escape. They remain there in their cell, give witness to Jesus, and thereby save the soul of the jailer and his whole household. The next morning, those magistrates send instructions that Paul and Silas are to be set free. But the apostles refuse to go. Instead, they send a message to the magistrates — a message that must have caused those magistrates to quake in their boots:

<sup>35</sup>But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” <sup>36</sup>And the jailer reported the words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent to let you go; now therefore come out and go in peace.” <sup>37</sup>But Paul said to them, “They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now cast us out secretly? No! let them come themselves and take us out.” <sup>38</sup>The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; <sup>39</sup>so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.  
(Acts 16:35-39, RSV)

It’s just a little story, but it illustrates a good gospel point: In the end, the only spirit worth following is the Holy Spirit. Spirits of greed and injustice are not going to work out well for us in the end.

We have spoken of the slave girl, her owners, the magistrates, and the various spirits moving these people along. Now, let’s speak of the spirit of Paul and Silas in their jailhouse chains and of the spirit of the jailer.

It is not an easy thing to bear to be beaten with rods and to be thrown into the inner prison, with feet fastened in stocks. The pain in their bodies owing to the beating, and their restriction of movement owing to the stocks, testified to the apostles that they were in jeopardy, that they were subject to the arbitrary power of corrupt magistrates. They are far from home, in a European town. They had no army behind them. They had reason to be miserable. Yet here they are at midnight rejoicing:

<sup>25</sup>But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...  
(Acts 16:25, RSV)

They did not abandon the nighttime to either reveling or to moaning, but rather to praying and praising the Lord. In this way, they caught the attention of the other prisoners. They listened to this extraordinary display of faith and spirit.

One of the souls won to Christ that evening was the jailer. It’s a hard job, being a jailer. He is not out in the sunshine harvesting wheat. He is not in the fresh air. Rather, he is trying to control prisoners — some of whom are hard and dangerous people. The jailer must control these prisoners, else he is going to end up a prisoner himself. The justice system will not tolerate escapes. But now, the jailer has reason to assume that Paul and Silas have escaped. The prison doors are broken and the fetters are unloosed. It is midnight, and so the jailer cannot see that Paul and Silas remain where they are. The jailer assumes that they have escaped and so the poor man falls under a spirit of despair. He prepares to kill himself.

That too is a strong and dangerous spirit in the world, both in ancient times and in our modern world: the spirit of despair.

And so it is good that Paul and Silas remain in their cells, for they had to contend with this false spirit about to destroy a human being. The apostles call out to the man, reassure the man, and in the end, they bring the man to faith in Jesus and baptize him and his family. And so it is that a life is saved. The spirit of suicide is replaced by a good spirit of faith in a Lord well worth living for.

I have said that this morning's story displays a variety of spirits — some good, some bad. Such a variety of spirits probably lives in each of us. At times we are inclined to pray and to praise the Lord as did Paul and Silas in their midnight prison. Sometimes we are moved by a spirit of greed, like the owners of the slave girl. At times, we might be inclined to compromise our integrity, moved along by a spirit of accommodation, like the magistrates in this morning's story. Heaven forbid, but at times we might even be beset by a spirit of despair, like the poor jailer.

And so there is a variety of spirits sweeping us along. When the Kingdom of God fully comes, this chaos of spirits will become orderly, gentle, wise, and holy. But there is some good news for you and me meanwhile. That good news is that within the welter of spirits that would move us along, if we listen to our hearts and if we will bring to mind the story of Jesus, we will find within us a good spirit waiting and hoping to grow stronger in us. This is the subject of next week's liturgy, Pentecost Sunday. I am speaking of the Holy Spirit — not a spirit of greed or fear or accommodation or despair — but the very Spirit of Jesus Christ himself hoping to become strong in us. The Holy Spirit is the life of Christ in us. The Holy Spirit is the joy and blessing of faith here and now. The Holy Spirit is our possibility, entrusted to us even now, that we will come to resemble our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.