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Easter 6C
Peace, Seattle
May 16, 2010 epk
Acts 16:16-34

WHAT COUNTS MOST?

It's quite a journey this chapter of ACTS takes us on, from the enthusiastic welcome Paul and Silas receive from Lydia, to the annoying rants of a slave girl; to the confrontation that ensues after Paul exorcises the spirit inhabiting her; to their beating and incarceration in the inner most cell of the city's jail.

There's a lot to take in this story: A full cast of characters; a complicated mix of motives; humor, drama, suspense, surprise—why there's even some special effects thrown in (earthquake)!

And the operative question that gets raised in all of this is:
WHAT IS THE DEEPEST, MOST POWERFUL, MOST PERVASIVE REALITY IN THE STORY?

Is it the system of economic oppression that turns human beings and the gifts they possess into marketable commodities? Is that the most pervasive reality here?

Is it the way the state deprives people of their liberty, whether warranted or not, when perceived national or economic interests are threatened?

Is it the age-old propensity of human beings to demonize those who are different, who are "other"—in race, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or culture?

Is the deepest, most powerful, most pervasive reality in this story the physical torture Paul and Silas endure? Or the metal bars of the prison doors? Or the wooden stocks that bind their feet?

While each of these realities add their own heft to this multilayered story, I submit to you that none of them is paramount.

Instead, the deepest reality operative in this story is Silas and Paul's unshakable faith—faith which has the audacity to believe that…

- in spite of having the deck stacked against them,
- in spite of being the target of verbal and physical assaults,
- in spite of the fact that their physical liberty has been taken from them
- they are convinced that their present and their future are held firmly and powerfully in the hands of a liberating God.

In the midst of such dire circumstances, Paul and Silas could have been overcome with fear. But they had learned to anticipate God's presence and power in the most unholy places, through the most unlikely means. They knew themselves not as victims but as agents of God who makes a way when there is no way. And through their faithful witness in word and song the Holy Spirit brought freedom not only to them, but to their jailor and his entire household.

God took a dire and desperate situation and turned it toward resurrection.

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Having witnessed their faith; having received their compassion, the jailor wanted what they had. And so he asks them: WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAFE/SAVED?

Here's a guy who's just seen his life pass before his eyes, who's come this close to taking his own life. He wants to know how he can get a hold of the same sense of safety and fearlessness and freedom that he sees operative in them.

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?
THEY ANSWER: PUT YOUR LIFE IN THE HANDS OF A DIFFERENT LORD.

How does he respond?

- He takes them from prison into his home, washes their wounds, and feeds them at his own table.
- And Paul and Silas in turn wash him and his whole family—wash them in the waters of baptism, and before the night is out one more family was reborn and the community of Christ gets a little bit bigger. AMAZING.

The theme for the Synod Assembly that Bob, Laura, Lucille and I were part of the last two days, was LIVING THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S WELCOME.

Our keynote speaker, Dr. Amy Oden, author of the book: GOD'S WELCOME: HOSPITALITY FOR A GOSPEL-HUNGRY WORLD,[1] spoke about the differences between the kind of hospitality she called "Wal-Mart greeter-ism," and the biblical concept of hospitality in which welcome is shared and experienced through openness, deep listening, and a readiness to embrace risk.

Punctuating the assembly reports and mission moments we learned a new liturgical response, it goes like this: GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS.

- GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS means that our baptisms came with the commission to be about God's work in the world.
- GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS means it's in your life and mine that the rubber of God's mission hits the road.
- GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS means that our daily relationships, encounters and actions are the very arenas God has chosen for carrying out God's work in the world.

GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS. It's what we do; it's who we are.

But, Bishop Boerger reminded us, while THE CHURCH IS US, IT'S NOT ABOUT US.

We're not here to keep the pews warm, or to see that our welfare and needs are met, but rather we are here because God has announced his radical welcome to us in Jesus Christ, and called us in turn to proclaim with our mouths and to show with our lives how expansive and inviting and joyful and satisfying that welcome is and can be for others too.

There is room for all in the wide-open and spacious life, the abundant life, God has shown the world in Jesus.

[1] Amy G. Oden, *God's Welcome: Hospitality for a Gospel-hungry World.* Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2008.

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In a few minutes, after we've shared the Lord's Supper and had our coffee and cookie, we'll gather here once again to talk about how we will fund the ministries to which God has called us for the rest of this year. And we'll talk about a boiler that, at age 66 seems about ready for retirement.

As we enter into those conversations, I invite us to hold firmly the same question we asked of our text today, that is: What is the deepest, most powerful, most pervasive reality in OUR story?

- Is the most pervasive reality our $11,000 deficit?
- Is it the anxiety we experience when we think about the state of our nation's economy and the recovery that's so slow it feels like it'll never catch on?
- Is the deepest, most powerful reality for us today our old oil-fired boiler in all its fragility and vulnerability?

These things I've named are certainly part of the story we're living right now.
We can't ignore them. But our story is bigger than they are. Our vision is broader. Our faith is deeper. And our gifts—the gifts of strength and leadership and generosity and compassion and welcome—are more encompassing.

God's grace and the Spirit's call to us is infinitely more powerful than any challenge we face.

The deepest reality operative in our story is the same one operative in the story of Paul and Silas—A FAITH WHICH BELIEVES that in spite of significant challenges, our present and our future are firmly in the hands of the One who became embedded in human flesh, offering himself completely that we might receive abundant life—the life the truly is life…life with no expiration date.

Prisons come in many sizes and shapes. The body can be a prison, when it's no longer functioning how it used to. The mind can be a prison, when we get stuck and we can't escape dark memories or regrets, or decisions, or shattered dreams.

We all need the assurance that the God who accompanied Paul and Silas into that dark prison will walk with us, too, in the dark and dead-end places in which we sometimes find ourselves.
We all, each one, need to hear God's word of radical welcome and to ingest that word of hope and forgiveness at Christ's table.

And then, we need to be about the work God has called us through the Spirit to perform.
GOD'S WORK – OUR HANDS.

Amen.