

“Light in the Darkness”

June 2, 2019

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Acts 16: 16-34

In this morning’s Scripture lesson, we see a whole lot of flexing going on. What I mean by that is there are power plays happening left and right. We are going to look at who is wielding the power, but more importantly, I want us to notice how power is used. For we all have some power in our arsenal. It might not be the power that makes us faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive or able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, but we do have power. It might be the power to influence. It might be financial power. It might be the power to control the feelings or mood of someone close to us. It might simply be the power to control our own attitude and thereby affect every person we come in contact with. We do not have superhero powers, but we all have power. The question is, how will we use it?

Our story begins with Paul and Silas and their companions going to their place of prayer in Philippi. Along the way they are met by a girl who has a spirit of divination. To you and me, that means she has the power to see beyond what the eyes can see and speak the truth about the present and the future. This girl is a double slave, as in, she is not only held captive by this spirit, but is also a slave to her owners who enjoy selling her services to people who want to know the future. At any rate, when this woman sees Paul and company, she starts following them and yelling out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” I am sure at first, this was a welcome endorsement, but after a few days, her constant crying out got a little old, a little annoying until Paul couldn’t take it anymore. He turned around and cast that spirit of divination out of her. It may have been out of frustration and annoyance, but Paul used his power in Jesus Christ to heal this woman. We don’t know anything about what happened to her after that, but at least she was freed from the clutches of that spirit.

What we do know is her owners were not happy because they could not sell her services anymore. They lost a source of income and needed satisfaction. So, they used the power of their connections and influence as locals to have the out-of-towners arrested and dragged to court. They didn’t tell the court and the people what actually happened, for that might make them sound a little greedy and uncaring about their slave girl. Instead, they used the power of nationalism and Roman pride to point out that these were strangers from out of town, they were Jewish, and practicing different beliefs and customs than a good Roman colony. They got the crowd riled with this fake nationalism (I sure am glad that doesn’t happen anymore) and just like at Jesus’ trial, the crowd used their power to influence the leaders to convict Paul and Silas of disturbing the peace. The magistrates flexed their muscles to show they had the power to carry out the will of the people and had the prisoners beaten with rods then thrown in the jail. Wanting to impress his bosses, the jailer then used his power to not only put Paul and Silas in the deepest, darkest part of the jail, but to chain them to the wall. Just goes to prove, being a

follower of Jesus Christ and working for the Lord means your life will always be smooth sailing with nothing but peace and prosperity. Or not.

At this point, it looks like the power of greed, lies, and a fake nationalist ideology that labels everyone different as dangerous and a legitimate target of violence is winning. The first sign that the powers of this world are really not in charge comes with the surprising songs in that dark cell. Paul and Silas' first act of real power is to not give up their power. They did not let their circumstances control them. This is huge. I know I have times when the day wins. I wake up late or the car doesn't want to start or its raining when I had outside plans. Little, tiny, insignificant things like that happen and I turn over the reins and give them the victory. I get grumpy and down and therefore get short with the people I care about most which brings them down and the system just spirals from there. And that is with silly little stuff. What would happen if something real came my way: a car wreck, an injury or illness, the loss of a loved one, financial ruin, relational torture and brokenness. Paul and Silas' first act of real power is to not give up their power. They did not let their circumstances control them. They were there as "servants of the Most High God, to proclaim to you the way of salvation." That is what they came there to do, so that is what they did. In the midst of the darkest part of the jail, chained to the wall, after being stripped and beaten with rods; they prayed out loud and sang hymns to God. Their circumstances didn't control them. Their mission controlled them. That is so huge for us. Keeping hold of the reins in the silly little things like oversleeping and having to rush the morning and arrive late, is practice for when the illness, the lose and the brokenness comes and we have to hold onto those reins for dear life. Paul and Silas' first act of real power is to not give up their power. They did not let their circumstances control them.

Then, in the midst of their jailhouse worship, God shows up. The earth shakes, the chains fall away and the jailhouse doors open. If this were any show on television or any movie I have ever watched, Paul and Silas would lead the prisoners to freedom, beating or killing every guard and jailer in their path. But again, for Paul and Silas and apparently all those who have been joining them in their all night jailhouse worship, their circumstances do not control them. Even when those circumstances change from being held by greedy, fake nationalistic thugs to being freed by the power of God, their circumstances do not control them. They keep hold of the reins. After all, they are "servants of the Most High God, here to proclaim the way of salvation." So as the head jailer is about to run himself through with his own sword for failing his superiors, Paul calls out "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." To his credit, the jailer recognizes that there is something going on here that is bigger than normal. He asks, "What must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

Obviously, Paul and Silas had the power of God on their side and the power of God won the day. But remember, we all have power. It might not be the power to cause earthquakes that shake the ground with such precision that shackles break open and doors fall down while keeping all the walls and roof intact, but we do have power. It might be the power to influence. It might be financial power or the ability to control the feelings or mood of someone close to us. We have the power to control how we respond to situations as opposed to letting them control

us. We all have power. The question is how are we going to use it? The slave girl's owners used their power to exploit another's affliction for personal profit. They used their connections to railroad the "outsiders" for their own personal satisfaction. The crowd used its power to influence the magistrates who used their power to impress the people at the expense of the innocent foreigners. Every single ounce of energy and power was used to increase personal pleasure and satisfaction at the expense of another. But how did Paul and Silas use their power? They continuously put themselves in harm's way for the sake of another. They kept hold of their power and didn't give it away to their circumstances and used it to bring life to the slave girl, to those in jail, and to the jailer and his family.

How do you use your power: to increase personal pleasure and satisfaction at the expense of another, or to bring life to another?

Mike Van Heyningen