

Seventh Sunday of Easter
The Rev. John Brock

Saturday, May 15, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 16:16-34; John 17:2-26

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I think I have said before, I really enjoy the book of Acts. It's got great stories and lessons in it and so often we overlook this book because it's NOT a gospel and it's not an epistle; kind of the way we tend to overlook a lot of our Old Testament books the same way. Yet, I think there are some really great lessons to be learned from these books, and especially tonight from our story about Paul and Silas and their encounter with the prophesying slave girl as well as a jailer. I read a commentary this week that helped me look at our passage from Acts in an entirely new way.

Most of us, probably, if we were to be asked what you thought of yourself, you would probably answer that, for the most part, 'well I think I'm a good person.' (Ok, for those of us who were raised in a good Lutheran congregation, we have to take for granted that, indeed, as we have all had pounded into us, that we are "in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves," or some variation of that.) Given that, knowing that we are **both** sinful and forgiven, I think that probably most of us would answer that, for the most part, 'I think I am a good person.'

What I read in this commentary was a study conducted by a Harvard professor names Robert Putnam, and a Notre Dame scholar named David Campbell, and they have written a book called "*Amazing Grace: How Religion is Reshaping Our Civic and Political Lives.*" In this book (I haven't read the book, I just read this explanation about the book) in this book they put forward the idea that people who gather regularly and frequently - and you need to get that "frequently" part in there because there are those people who gather "regularly" for worship on Christmas and Easter and NO other time - regularly and frequently, that these folks are three to four times more likely to be involved in their community than are those people who are NOT involved in some type of faith group. People who ARE involved are more apt to: work on community projects; belong to a voluntary association; more likely to vote in a local election, or to attend public meetings; as well as donate both time and money to public causes, not only religious causes, but secular causes as well.

The study goes on to show that these people who are involved in a faith community are generally just all around "nicer" people because they tend to go out of their way to help those less fortunate. They behave this way NOT because they are trying to *earn God's love*, or work their way into salvation; rather they are this way because of the **relationships** that they have in their faith community. In other words, the people with whom we surround ourselves, aid us, guide us, strengthen us for good OR for bad in whatever moral decisions that we make on a day to day basis. So I guess what my mom told me when I was a kid is true: You have to choose your friends carefully.

In other words, All of You help Me make good moral decisions. Decisions that I might not otherwise make. Let me give you an example: I think I have mentioned a few times before, I am not the world's most courteous driver. At times as I am coming down Chestnut Street on my way here to Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, I will get behind someone who finds it necessary to come to a Full and Complete three-second stop at Each and Every One of the SIX stop signs between the Bypass and Trinity. And I need to *remind* myself when I am behind a person who is coming to a full and complete three-second stop that tailgating is bad, and tailgating a Member of Trinity is even worse. And since I can't see who is driving that car during that full and complete three-second stop, I should calm down and let them get a good distance ahead of me and just relax. I DO that, not because I am such a good guy; I do that because I don't want to get any of YOU annoyed with me. And so YOU ALL help me be a better driver. You, as my community of faith, you're part of my "moral compass," my "moral community." So why do I bring all of this up?

Our main guys in our story of Acts tonight, Paul and Silas (and I also have to momentarily get off the track because I think last week I said it was Paul and BARNABUS, and while indeed Paul and Barnabus do a trip earlier, Barnabus was with Paul on his first trip, I mis-spoke last week, it is Paul and SILAS who are there in Philippi. There, I've corrected myself.) Paul and Silas and some other unnamed folks (you might have noticed it talks about **we** were walking along and so we say that the author of the Book of Acts is Luke, the author of the Gospel) so they were walking along, Paul and Silas and probably Luke are staying there in Philippi, they're staying with Lydia. (Remember we learned about Lydia last week in our reading from Acts.) And Paul and Silas and his group they've been preaching, they've been witnessing their faith, but all the while that they're there in Philippi doing all of this, they've been followed around for several days by some young slave girl who apparently has a spirit of some kind who knows that Paul speaks for the Lord God Almighty. This spirit - through the girl - keeps calling out "These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Now I'm guessing probably at first that was a little bit of an ego boost - 'Hey, somebody's giving us some free PR, this is really good.' And you know, a little bit of an ego boost there, but apparently after the third or fourth or fifth day of this girl following them around hollering this out who knows how often - I love the way that it said - Paul got greatly annoyed. He gets fed up. He turns around and he rebukes the spirits to come out of this girl, and the girl is freed.

That's really good for Paul and really good for the girl. Not so good for the folks who own that slave because they were making money off of her prophesying. They have lost their cash cow. So the owners of this girl have Paul and Silas arrested and brought up on charges. **First** the charge of "disturbing" the city and **second** because they are advocating for customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to observe or adopt. But the **third**, the REAL charge that they have, shows the whole anti-Semitic, anti-Jewish sentiment of the first world because they are charged with the fact of simply **BEING JEWISH**.

They're stripped naked; they're publically beaten; and they're thrown in jail. So this is where we might start thinking along the lines of 'it's okay to tailgate because some guy just cut me off in traffic,' we might expect Paul and Silas to say some disparaging remarks about Philippi and the local government. Maybe if they were *alone* in prison, maybe they might have sunk into despair. Maybe we would have gotten, here in the midst of the Book of Acts, one of those psalms: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Instead, because they have each other there to lean on, from whom to gather support as they spend the night there in the innermost cell with their feet in stockades, they're singing and they are praying aloud. They're beaten, naked, and humiliated and they're saying, "Hey God! It's us, Paul and Silas."

We might be thinking, 'well of course, this is *Paul and Silas* we are talking about. They're obviously really good friends, they've been around each other for a long time, they know and love and care for each other so of course they're going to support one another.' The thing is before this trip, before Paul set out for Philippi, he really didn't know Silas at all. There is only one mention of Silas before Paul starts off on this trip, in Acts, and Silas is called an "elder of the church," which means that Silas was back there in Jerusalem, and Paul never really hung out in Jerusalem other than when he was called on the carpet to report to the Apostles. And so, pretty much Paul is there in Jerusalem and says, 'hey, I'm going to do this mission to the Gentiles, anyone want to go along?' I am guessing they all kind of just looked at one another and Silas just says, "well, yes, I'll go."

How do Paul and Silas get through this first time that they're thrown in jail? Yes, they had their faith, yes they knew that God was with them. In addition to that, they had the strength and support of each other. They had. . . "the Community of Saints." This is the thing that I think we tend to forget about or overlook. Christ never calls us to be BFFs with Every Single Solitary Believer. We ARE called to love and support one another. We ARE called to be that moral compass that honorable group, that community of faith for one another. We have it in scripture, we have it in a Harvard study, we have it in my driving, that we are called to not simply Go to church. We are called to BE the church for one another.

Amen.