

Seventh Sunday of Easter: Sunday after the Ascension
Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

May 16, 2010

A car bomb is discovered in Times Square, a suspect is arrested, a naturalized U.S. citizen, and a U.S. senator proposes legislation to strip the citizenship of anyone the State Department concludes is involved with a terrorist group.

Paul, a Roman citizen, performs an exorcism in the Roman colony of Philippi, and he and his companion Silas are dragged before the authorities, denounced as Jews who proclaim alien practices, stripped, beaten and jailed, without a hearing or trial. Not only the owners, whose hope of profit from the spirit-possessed slave girl is gone, but the whole citizenry join in denouncing Paul.

Fear and hatred of what is foreign and strange is as old as time. Remember the Pharaoh who first enslaved the Israelites when they became numerous, for fear that if Egypt were invaded, the Israelites would “join our enemies and fight against us.” (Exodus 1:10) Fear is as fresh as the day’s headlines.

But look at this: earlier this year, Nelson Mandela invites one of his prison guards to a dinner in his own home, to celebrate the 20th anniversary of his liberation from prison, and their friendship. Paul and Silas are welcomed into their jailer’s home, where the jailer himself washed their wounds and served them dinner.

Surprising outbursts of love and friendship among those who by all rights should hate and fear each other—these, too, seem to be both ancient and as fresh as the new day.

The adventures of Paul and Silas in Philippi set off wonderings about love and fear, freedom and slavery. Who *is* free in this story? And how do they get that way?

Paul and Silas: free to travel, visit Philippi. But maybe, even with Paul’s Roman citizenship, they’re not so at ease as to let their purpose there become broadly public. Came to proclaim Jesus as Messiah and Lord, but to a targeted group. Looked for a “house of prayer,” synagogue, outside the city gates, down by the river. (Last week’s reading from Acts 16:9-15) Confident as Paul was in the risen Lord, and in himself, no need to make a stir and possibly undermine the mission.

The Hellenistic world was suspicious of Jews, a group who lived among them but did not participate fully in civic life. Jews had privileged status in the Roman Empire, but at the local level they were susceptible to sudden outbreaks of antisemitic fury. (Luke T. Johnson, Acts (Sacra Pagina), 295, 302.)

The suspicion cut both ways. Recall Peter’s statement (Acts 10:28) that it was unlawful for a Jew to associate with a Gentile. It took a vision from God to change that stance for Christian Jews.

Fear and hatred of the “others,” the ones different from “us”, are not only deep-rooted but also complex, and often have some basis in reality.

Slave girl: Free to walk about, but doubly enslaved, by her owners and the spirit that possesses her. It drives to compulsively follow Paul and Silas, and loudly identifies them as “slaves of the highest God”—higher even than Apollo, whose prophetic spirit has the girl possessed.

Owners: free to use and profit from the slave’s “gift.” When Paul, in irritation not compassion, frees her, they retaliate in a telling way. Do not seek damages. (Though staying with a wealthy local woman, Lydia, these two don’t look prosperous.) Retaliate by invoking another, dangerous spirit that’s always close at hand: xenophobia. The undue fear and hatred of the foreign and strange. How free can anyone be when this spirit is stirred up, even those who do the stirring?

Magistrates: in charge of this Roman colony and bound by fear. Somewhat reminiscent of Pilate, fearful of the crowd, they quickly dispatch the prisoners.

The prisoners: back to Paul and Silas. Now chained and locked in the deepest, darkest prison cell, at the darkest hour, they pray and sing hymns.

Bruce Jenneker, Episcopal priest from South Africa, remembers being jailed, along with many others, during the long struggle for freedom in his country. Part of the pain of imprisonment was being cut off from the support and solidarity of the others.

Alone in his cell, isolated and afraid, he heard, from a distance, “*If you believe and I believe, and we together pray, the Holy Spirit must come down and set God’s people free.*”¹ One by one, voices joined in the song until the whole prison rang with their faith, bringing strength and community back to life. Freedom and justice would come. (WLP notes)

There is a Spirit more powerful than the spirit of fear and hatred: the Spirit of God. At table, during their last supper together before his Passion and death, Jesus has told his disciples about the Spirit he will send them: Advocate, Paraclete, One Coming Alongside to Help, to teach and guide them.

He has prayed for them, as they listen in, asking the Father to protect them, and asking that they may be one as he and the Father are one (17:11). In that oneness there is no fear; only love.

¹ Words and Music: Traditional Zimbabwe; adap. Rom English source as taught by Tarasai, ed. And arr. By John Bell c. 1990 Iona Community/Wilid Goose Publications. Hymn 806 in Wonder Love and Praise. Sung here, in the sermon. At the 10:30 a.m. service, the congregation sang back to the preacher, this having been the sequence hymn.

But, we are get ahead of ourselves. What about Paul's jailer? He has the keys; he is not free. He is bound; fearful of shame and the severe retribution for failure of responsibility that held the empire together. (Cf. LTJ, Acts, 302, n. 38) He is so fearful he cannot conceive of prisoners who wouldn't take advantage of earthquake damage to escape, who would have compassion or concern for their jailer!

Paul saves his neck, and saves him and his family from the grip of fear. It's Paul's abiding in and leaning into love that does it.

This is what an 18-year-old South African prison guard saw in Nelson Mandela, that broke down his own interior prison of prejudice, fear and hatred and enabled the two to become friends while Mandela was in prison.

This is what the whole world has seen in Desmond Tutu who, while hemmed in by the vicious system of apartheid, was nonetheless free, filled with joy along with sadness; free to love and show compassion even for those who oppressed his people. This because he knows that *all* are children of God.

This is what many have seen in Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh who in his war-torn land of Viet Nam showed compassion to people on all sides, civilians and military alike, and continues to teach compassion, peace, and the oneness of all being.

Now, to include Thich Nhat Hanh among these practitioners and witnesses of love, would disturb, nay, infuriate, the Johannine community which, to our great learning and benefit, preserved the Gospel according to John. It would disturb and infuriate some, even many, in the Church today.

Jesus prays, in John, not only for his followers at table with him, but for all who will follow: for us. He desires, wills, that we all share the same intimacy with him and each other that he has with the Father. That we be one, through the indwelling of Father and Son, in love; so that the world might see and believe that he is the revelation of the Father.

It is an enduring, inspiring, heartening image. For the Johannine community, it is a desire and vision limited to the community of believers. "Love one another" is the watchword in John (13:34, 35; 15:17). Not "love your neighbor" as in the synoptics (Mt. 22:37; Mk 12:29; Lk 10:27). Not "love your enemies" (Mt. 5:43). Not be a neighbor even to a Samaritan (Lk. 10:29-37)

The Johannine community's animosity was born of rejection by their own people and expulsion from the synagogues. Hurt and anger hardened into bitterness and hate and led to a world view of "us and them," with all the attendant dangers. The community itself split into hostile factions, all in the name of love of God. The same justification is made for later splits in the Church, including our own. For centuries, the mind set of "us and them," believers and non-believers, has provided fuel for hating and destroying millions of human beings—not only in

Christianity but in the other world religions, as well. All in the name of love of God; but a love grown somehow xenophobic.

When we think or react this way, we have it all backwards. I am, we are, *constrained by love*; not free to *limit love ourselves*. Not even when we are fearful.

The Father was constrained by love of the world to send the Son. The Son was constrained by bonds of love for the Father, and for the world the Father so loved: constrained to die.

By the gift of love revealed in Him and dwelling in us by the Spirit, I we are freed, from fear, isolation. Because we stand in the Father's love for the Son, the Son's love for the Father, and their self-giving love for us we can stand unafraid before the stranger and the alien, without fear.

We are free, *because* we are constrained by love: not free to betray, hate, wound, kill, exclude.

We are freed, for intimacy, joy, trust, forgiveness; free to know others who differ from us in significant ways . We are freed for abundance of life, now and always.

The spirit of fear is as old as human time; likewise the reflex to drive out or flee those whom we fear.

Older still is the Word who is love, once revealed in human flesh, who was in the beginning with God, who was God, before time, before creation, before the foundation of the world, before fear. As he once dwelt among us to reveal the self-giving love that unites him with the Father and with us, so now, he dwells among and within us as the Spirit.

Because of the One who dwells in us, we *are* different from the world that so often is possessed by a spirit of fear. The gift of this difference is the gift we have to share not only with each other, but with the world.

It is complicated because dangers are real and the spirit of fear is ever present around us, if not within.

“Always breathe in Christ,” one of the early Church fathers advised. Keep breathing. Trust the Spirit to guide us through all the complex divisions of the world into the oneness for which all were created. Without the love of God in Christ, we are no different from the fearful world in which we live, and into which Christ sends us.