

Getting in Good Trouble (Acts 16:16-34)

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The Seventh Sunday after Easter (Psalm 97; John 17:20-26; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21)

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/getting-into-good-trouble

One way to plot the arc of your life is to see your life as the sum total of the decisions you make and to follow how those decisions then make you. In *All the Pretty Horses*, novelist Cormac McCarthy described a decision-dilemma facing two young boys who had ridden horses down into Mexico; when they crossed the border, they journeyed where they had no legal protection and no one to look after them. In a particularly tough situation, and contemplating the stakes of their decisions, the older boy offered this cautionary wisdom to the younger: “Ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made before that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I'd made before it.”¹

The reality is life is made up of the decisions we make so we connect the dots between the choices we make and the consequences we receive because of those choices. Worried about the metrics of that kind of analysis? No worries, an old Hebrew truth suggests “nothing is lost.” Nothing is wasted. In the ecology of creation, it’s all there. Even if you smash a thing so thoroughly it seems the atoms themselves are broken apart, mysteriously they reassemble, becoming something else perhaps, becoming something unexpected. Nevertheless, they are ever-present, albeit in some different form or purpose.

Paul and Silas followed the Voice of God and wandered into their own far country where they faced the tough challenges that went with their willingness to risk. Acts 16 is intriguing because it has two back-to-back stories about women. One woman came to follow Jesus from another faith. She was affluent, a rarity in that she was a businesswoman who traded in expensive cloth. The text described her as “a worshiper of God” who came to faith in Jesus after hearing Paul preaching outside the walls of Philippi where the women gathered as a place of prayer. Lydia was an uncommon woman in that her affluence meant she traveled about freely and handled her own affairs and was largely free to live her own life as she wished. She was influential in the New Testament as the earliest Christian missionary activities were funded by her generosity.

But in our reading in Acts there is a second equally compelling story about a woman whose only power came from the services she provided to those who owned her. She was likely a stray who was carefully profiled for her ability to make money for her owners. She used her prophetic powers and followed Paul and Silas around town announcing to all that these were men of God and that they brought with them the message of God’s salvation. She was not quiet and she was not shy.

¹ Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

It's not surprising the Bible refers to the enslavement of this girl as a form of demon possession. She was a girl stripped of her personhood in order to justify her slavery. Evil lurks in the dark places in the world and one doesn't have to be religious to think of these things as the work of some demonic evil, whether one believes in demonic forces or not.

A few years ago, we came face-to-face with the reality that three young women had been abducted and were held captive in the hellish squalor of an abandoned house in Cleveland. They were picked up by a man who innocently offered them a ride and they foolishly made a decision that altered everything about their lives, putting them in a nightmarish prison where they were sexually abused and tormented by their captor for a decade. The three women and a six-year-old girl born in captivity were all dramatically rescued after ten years of living in a house that had all the appearances to the neighbors of being vacant. All this occurred right there in the neighborhood. What does it take to get us to notice when something is not right?

The text is clear on this matter: The only ones who rose up were the slave owners who raised their voices clamoring because someone had upset the system. In an ironic twist, the slave owners demanded justice for their egregious loss. Thus, Paul and Silas were thrown into prison – it was the price they paid for doing something to intervene. They did the right thing and were punished severely making one wonder whether the community ever wants to disturb the status quo. Often, it's all a part of a carefully balanced world where there are some who profit at the expense of those who actually give of themselves to produce. Even the good folks are woven carefully into acceptance that “this is just the way things are.”

Congressman John Lewis taught us, “Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

Rather than complaining about their pitiable situation, Paul and Silas sang songs in the night. They were at peace with the troubles they made for themselves because they had done the right thing and were willing to pay the price for doing so. What they did was a powerful refusal to invest in the accepted narrative that would suggest nothing good could come out of their suffering – that only sorrow and pity could come of it – rather than choosing to make something useful out of it. The Bible is clear: Under the right conditions, we have incredible power and usually don't have a clue we have that kind of power available to us.

What will it take for us to take a stand for the abuse of women – acts of enslavement that occur right in front of our eyes?

- The human trafficking of women and children in the world, specifically in the U.S., in Missouri, and even in Jefferson City?
- The intentional legislative efforts to curtail or eliminate public health care for women?
- The inequity of jobs and salaries for women based solely on gender?

It's one thing to romanticize our love for our mothers and our daughters, but it's empty if we don't work to make the world safer for the sisterhood of women everywhere. God help us to determine to stand with the helpless and those enslaved unjustly. God help us to open our eyes and to stand up against the injustices right before us.

Maybe one more teaching from Congressman Lewis to shape our understanding of this story: "We have been too quiet for too long. There comes a time when you have to say something. You have to make a little noise. You have to move your feet. This is the time."

Paul and Silas were thrown in jail for doing the right thing, for intervening in a public issue that was right under the noses of the community. With God's help, they sang their way out of jail that night, but they got there for making something tangible out of living their faith – the right faith, the right reason, the right action. Thanks be to God for their courage and for the model of living faith that we can give thanks for.

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