

“Jailhouse Rock”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Acts 16:16-34
July 1, 2018
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.

I can't help but think of Elvis:

*The warden threw a party in the county jail
The prison band was there and they began to wail
The band was jumpin' and the joint began to swing
You should've heard them knocked-out jailbirds sing*

That almost certainly wasn't what Paul and Silas sang, because it's not really a hymn to God, you see.

I mentioned two weeks ago that our denomination had elected new General Assembly co-moderators in Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri and the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann. One of the outgoing co-moderators, the Rev. Dr. Jan Edmiston, wrote this week about her trip to the airport as she was leaving the 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in St. Louis:

It had been a great week for a long list of reasons and I was staring into space and relishing the memories when this conversation happened:

Lyft Driver Kevin: Were you here for a conference?

Me: Yes, the Presbyterian Church USA. You might have seen us on the news Tuesday night. We were on the local Fox channel.

LDK: Why were you on the news?

Me: We marched from the Convention Center to the Courthouse with \$47,000 to bail out some people who couldn't pay their cash bail. It was our worship offering from Saturday.

LDK: Your church did that?

Me: Well, it's not just my church. But yes, we did that. We paid the bail to release about 3 dozen non-violent offenders. It was pretty great.

We got to the airport, pulled over, and when we went to his trunk to retrieve my luggage, Kevin said, “I feel like I’ve met a friend today. That’s the best thing the Church has ever done.” And he hugged me good-bye.¹

As our fellow Presbyterians made the march to free those who were only still behind bars because they are poor, they sang:

*Ain't gonna let nobody
Turn me 'round, Turn me 'round
Ain't gonna let nobody
Turn me round
I'm gonna keep on walkin', Keep on talkin'
Marchin' into freedom land*

I suppose that’s not what Paul and Silas were singing either. Their journey from freedom to behind bars began when they left Palestine and traveled on sea and land to Europe, north of Greece, to the coastal city of Philippi. They had come to teach, to spread the Gospel, to share the good news of sacred reconciliation and redemption and how the reign of God was present here, in this place, in these days, in this hour.

They come across this slave girl who was making her owners some serious cash. She was said to have a spirit inside her. We might have diagnosed her with some form of mental illness. She would say *things*. Maybe they would make people uncomfortable. Maybe they would make people laugh. Her owners had seen a chance to make a quick buck, so they charged for her to tell fortunes. She’d been helpful to have as a slave. But now she was a for-profit prisoner. Everything is great until Paul and Silas show up.

The fortune-telling girl starts following Paul and company around and proclaiming *things*: ““These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Wherever they went to tell their story, she was there, interrupting. Finally, Paul has had enough and he commands whatever it is that was making her act so unusually to come out of her.

And it does! She stops in her tracks and her demon has left her and she is free to no longer be stared at and free to no longer amuse the people of Philippi — freed from being a sideshow act. Ah, but there’s the rub. She won’t make money for her owners anymore, and how are they ever to put bread on the table without their prisoner? They wrangle Paul and Silas and take them to see the judge.

Paul and Silas, you see, are disturbing the city. And they’re outsiders. Foreigners with a different religion. They’re Middle Easterners and they’ve come here to cause trouble. Let’s go back to the time before people like this showed up in our cities. Detain them. Make Macedonia Great Again.

¹ Jan Edmiston, at <https://achurchforstarvingartists.wordpress.com/2018/06/28/thats-the-best-thing-a-church-has-ever-done/>

The crowd is in a frenzy and it attacks Paul and Silas and the judge orders them beaten and then they're thrown into a detention center, into the innermost cell with their feet locked up.

Perhaps you heard the story that broke in March of the sheriff who lined his pockets with three-quarters of a million dollars procured by saving money on food at the Etowah County Detention Center in Gadsden. The inmates were served foul, rotting, insect-infested food.² The sheriff bought a beach house. He was taking advantage of an incentive presented to him.³ This same facility houses about three hundred male immigration detainees, charging US Immigration and Customs Enforcement only \$45 per day for the pleasure. Human rights groups have labeled Etowah “among the worst” immigration detention centers in the country, with inadequate medical care, no access to outdoor recreation, and visitation only by videophone.⁴

I got to visit the lynching memorial in Montgomery just a few weeks after it opened. A few blocks away is the accompanying experience called The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. When I entered the museum, there were 19th Century jail cells with eerie holograms telling their stories. A woman pleaded with me to help her find her daughter. They'd been separated, you see. I knew she was just a video image. And I knew that she was just a video image of an actor. But I couldn't walk past until she finished telling her story. I knew that the rest of the museum wouldn't be any easier.

Sure enough, there was an exhibit which consisted of metal stools with metal tables and telephones straight out of a prison movie. Across from my seat was a large video screen, and on it, twiddling his thumbs, sat a man in a prison jumpsuit. He waited until I picked up the phone for our visitation. Then he told his story. This was a real prisoner, but again, just a video, but I couldn't bring myself to hang up until he was done.

In 1972, there were fewer than 200,000 people behind bars in the United States. Today that number is 2.2 million. Prisons are overcrowded. State budgets feel that pinch. We have 5% of the world's population here. But we have nearly a quarter of its prisoners. And we are afraid of letting foreigners in? Over the last twenty-five years, the violent crime rate has called by more than fifty percent, and yet we are spending more than ever to keep people locked up.⁵

The earthquake came and the chains were loosed and the doors came off. The warden came to check on things after the quake and found all the prisoners free — his worst nightmare. He's overwhelmed with panic and failure and the immensity of his problem, and he decides to end it all. But he hears a voice in

² https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2018/03/inside_etowah_county_jail_nigh.html?__vzf=rtw_top_pages%3D1983800015366

³ https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/index.ssf/2018/03/etowah_sheriff_pocketed_over_7.html

⁴ <http://shutdownetowah.org/about-the-campaign/>

⁵ Equal Justice Initiative

the dark, Paul's, saying: "Wait! Don't! We are here." The warden asks these guys what their deal is and they tell him about Jesus and the night ends with dinner and laughter and baptisms and rejoicing.

The slave girl was freed and it caused no end of distress and consternation. No one celebrated. Money had been left on the table.

But the city jailer of Philippi had seen a new way. His life had been transformed. He learned about liberation and broken chains and a life free from the judgment and fear that overwhelms us.

Our God binds us to covenant and love and promises and to dream a world bigger than the one we see before us. Our God does not bind us with chains and bars, but with bread and water and a cross that stands empty to the sky.

We persist in trying to solve our problems with walls and bars and keys and insect-infested food, when bread and water and cross would serve us so much better. We celebrate freedom this week — don't forget that as we ooh and aah at the brilliant fireworks Wednesday night. We celebrate a glorious freedom from a tyrant. A freedom to make our own path. A freedom to choose the kind of nation we will be.

We also cannot forget that the nation we are was built on ships sailing full of prisoners, brought to our shores where children were separated from their families and then kept in slavery for generation upon generation. We have tried the lock 'em-up-and-throw-away-the-key path to allaying our fears and building our society. It's not working very well. We're not getting anywhere at all locking up non-violent criminals for years and years. We're not making much progress slamming doors shut on lives and looking the other way.

In about thirty seconds, we'll sing:

*From the fears that long have bound us
free our hearts to faith and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days,
for the living of these days.*

If we are looking for God's Spirit, we might be wise to check on the other side of the bars. That's where she tends to hang out — with those who need God the most.