



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

CANON WENDY CLAIRE BARRIE, CANON FOR INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRIES
THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, JUNE 1, 2025
ACTS 16:16-34; PSALM 97; REVELATION 22:12-14,16-17,20-21; JOHN 17:20-26

WHAT ABOUT THE SLAVE GIRL?



A parent in our carpet community shared with me that their family was briefly over at her parents' house, where just a few weeks before they'd had brunch and an egg hunt on the holiday. As they drove away, their four-year-old told them to stop, he wanted to get Easter eggs at Grandma's. She told him,

"They're gone, you found them all! No more until next Easter, so sad." To which he quickly responded, "Canon Wendy said Easter is for fifty days!"

And here we are, at last, on the seventh Sunday of Easter. Thursday was Ascension Day, when Jesus in the middle of chatting

with his friends was taken up into heaven in a way that left them staring. I imagine them slack-jawed and confounded. Jesus has left and the disciples are bewildered, bereft, until the Holy Spirit descends on them like flames, like wind. But that's a story for next Sunday. Today's story from the Acts of the Apostles is both highly dramatic and hyper-specific. Paul and Silas are in the Roman colony of Phillippi on their way to a house of prayer when they encounter a slave girl with a spirit of divination; in Greek it is literally "of the python." She is associated with the Pythia, the Oracle at Delphi, for centuries a prophetic source of wisdom in ancient Greece. The slave girl follows them and repeatedly cries out the truth about Paul and Silas, they are "slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." This goes on for days, and Paul loses his cool. We are told he is very much annoyed and calls the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus Christ. Her owners are infuriated, since they can no longer profit from her fortune-telling. They make a complaint that's couched in terms of religious difference and citizenship status, but we know that's just a pretext. This phrasing from the Common English Bible sounds jarringly familiar: "They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the officials in the city center. When her owners approached the legal authorities, they said,

'These people are causing an uproar in our city. They are Jews who promote customs that we Romans can't accept or practice.' The crowd joined in the attacks." Didn't we just hear this on the evening news?

Paul and Silas spend the night in prison, praying and singing to God, with all the other prisoners listening to them. At midnight an earthquake strikes, powerful enough to fling open the prison doors and break the chains of those within. The jailer who had been sound asleep rushes in, and certain that the prisoners have escaped, for which the punishment will be his death, draws his sword. Paul shouts to him in a loud voice. "Don't harm yourself! We are all still here." This too seems like a miracle, and right there, in the middle of the night, the jailer asks, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas tell him, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved—you and your entire household!" The jailer washes their wounds which he may have inflicted, invites them into his home, and with his household gathered round, more stories and a meal are shared. Paul and Silas speak the Word of the Lord to them, and everyone is baptized. The jailer is overjoyed.

The next morning the legal authorities send the police to release Paul and Silas. These words, too, could almost be taken from the front page of any newspaper: "Even though

we are Roman citizens, they beat us publicly without first finding us guilty of a crime, and they threw us into prison,” Paul reminds the police when he insists on leaving only by their escort. They receive an apology, and the requested escort, and return to Lydia’s home. I can’t stop thinking about the slave girl. I wonder about the part that’s left out of scripture, what happened to her afterwards? Why don’t we know her name, or the resolution of her story? I don’t want to let Paul off the hook. The jailer was overjoyed, but we know nothing about how the slave girl felt. Was she as free as Paul and Silas? Or did her owners find another, more brutal way to exploit her? The slave girl matters. I hope that she was taken in by Lydia, the newly baptized cloth merchant whose story we heard last Sunday.

We are witnesses to the church being formed in Philippi—its first members would have been Lydia, the wealthy businesswoman and her family members and her slaves, and of course the jailer, who was likely a combat veteran of the Roman army, along with his family members and his slaves or servants. Even this small group was intergenerational and of diverse backgrounds. They were not yet called Christians; rather, they were known to others by their actions, they were “Followers of the Way”: “All the believers were united and shared everything,” we hear

about the Jesus followers in Jerusalem in the second chapter of Acts: “They would sell pieces of their property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God’s goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to their number those who were being saved.” In the gospel we hear Jesus praying for his disciples the night before his crucifixion. “I’m not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word,” Jesus says, and he’s now talking about Paul, Silas, Lydia, the jailer, he’s praying for us, and for those who will come to follow Jesus long after us.

Then Jesus says, “I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.”

Jesus prays that we will be one. Not that we will agree, or that we will be alike, but that we will be one. Paul may have recalled that story when he writes to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Sixty-two years ago, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. aligned himself with Paul when he wrote the Letter from a Birmingham Jailⁱⁱ, in response to “A Call for Unity” from eight white Alabama clergymen, including two Episcopal Bishops. The most famous quote from Dr. King’s letter makes it clear that achieving unity is not that simple:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment

of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” Paul and Silas received justice. What about the slave girl?

We follow Jesus, and we also *follow* Jesus, we come after him, we take up the work he has left for us to do, the work of becoming one, or of recognizing the deep theological truth that we are one and we need to act like it. “Justice is what love looks like in public,” Dr. Cornell West says. May we all be free, so that we all may be one. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

John 17:20-26 *[Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."]*

ⁱ Mural of Trayvon Martin in Detroit by Katie Yamasaki

ⁱⁱThe full text of “A Letter from the Birmingham Jail” can be accessed here: <https://www.christiancentury.org/features/letter-birmingham-jail?code=yEga2K0P3yFjxRR0w8xr>