

**“Nameless, Unprotected and Alone”
Spirit of Peace UCC**

June 20, 2010

Scripture: Acts 16: 16-24

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The text for today was in the lectionary for May 16th. I didn't use it that Sunday, but it has been gnawing on me ever since, because the story I read wasn't the story I remembered. It is a story about Paul and his travels as he built the early church and it is one that I learned long ago...and I thought I knew it...at least the bare bones of the story.

The version that lived in my head had Paul and Silas healing a demon-possessed woman, then being thrown into jail because of this act of compassionate ministry, but they are freed from their imprisonment because of an earthquake...that surely was an act of God.

But...none of the things I remember are true. Talk about rockin' my world! Paul and Silas don't heal a demon-possessed woman, they aren't thrown in jail because of their ministry and they do not escape as a result of an earthquake.

Let us listen together for the Spirit's leading in this story from Acts 16.

Acts 16: 16-24 *One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.*

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord* to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*

Upon reflection, the story I was taught over-tells and stretches things a bit in order to make sure that we knew that God was with Paul and Paul was doing God's work. Now, I'm not saying that God-with-Paul-and-Paul-with-God isn't part of his basic resume. What I am saying is that is not the story this story is telling.

So, what is really going on in this story? Paul and Silas are new in the Roman colony-city of Philippi. They've already had some success sharing about Jesus and his life giving message. They have just converted and baptized Lydia, a wealthy cloth-dealer, and her entire household at a place of prayer near a river.

As they head back to that same place of prayer, they come across another woman. She was a slave and quite valuable to her owners because she had a gift. She was not demon-possessed. She had a spirit of divination...the gift of prophecy. The language used to describe her suggests that her form of prophecy was associated with the great oracles that were often sought out for their wisdom and counsel. Prophetesses of her type were highly regarded by people in the Hellenistic world...making it quite unusual that she is a slave...but there is so little said about her, it is hard to know the circumstances that led to her enslavement. What we do know from the text is that she is a money-maker for her owners.

When Paul and Silas come across this slave-girl, she begins to prophesy about them. Interestingly, she calls them slaves, slaves of the Most High God, and she says that they proclaim the way of salvation. And she is dead on. Her prophecy is correct.

They are willing slaves to the good news of God's love for everyone. And the way of life they profess is life-giving...in other words, salvific...the way to salvation.

She follows them around for days, crying out with her prophesy. Paul gets tired of it...the text says it plainly...he's very annoyed. He does not want to listen to her...so, he expels the spirit from her.

That is all we know about her...that is where her story ends.

Well, none of the rest of the story stacks up against the one I thought I knew. They weren't imprisoned because of their ministry and they didn't escape after the earthquake. As I said earlier, this story was over-told to show God at work in Paul. What I am now struck by is that no one, including Paul, explores and celebrates God at work in the slave girl.

She was prophesying the truth. She listened and heard the wonderful...the glorious...the life-changing message that Paul and Silas brought, but her enthusiastic outbursts bugged Paul. So, he drove the gift out of her...and then he went on about his ministry...a ministry that was more important than her.

We have no idea how she felt about losing her gift of prophecy. There's no indication that she felt burdened by her condition. In fact, she may have felt a great sense of loss at losing her gift.

Paul did not heal her of a demon possession. In actuality, he left this nameless woman giftless, unprotected and alone. In fact, without owners, she was probably pushed even further to the edges of society. And why? In her own way, she was preaching the good news...affirming Paul's ministry...but he didn't listen to her. He didn't affirm her or her dreams of salvation. There was no baptism...no taking her into the church...no ongoing relationship. It may be that her needs were so monumental that Paul didn't want to get involved. It would slow down what he perceived was his ministry. Whatever the reason, Paul relieves himself of her annoying company and she is just dropped by the wayside and forgotten.

I am left disturbed by all of this. I am left asking myself if I have "helped" to take care of my own needs without regard for the reality of one I "helped"? When have I taken care of myself or made assumptions...when has the good news been shared with me, but I have turned a deaf ear to it because I had other priorities or the one who delivered the message wasn't someone I wanted to listen to?

Paul and this unnamed woman have given me lots to think about over the past month, but it really came home to me last week. I had the opportunity to be in the company of two Native American leaders who each shared a dream...an idea... a way to reach out to the marginalized people on our reservations in life-giving ways. In their dreams I could hear Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God and the way things ought to be. As best I can, I want to describe briefly each encounter. I want to do this for two reasons. I want to honor the storytellers who spoke from their hearts...and I want to know if their dreams resonate with you...could you see yourself committing to a long term relationship with Native People on the reservation to see their dreams come into fruition? Could you see the Spirit of Peace community committing to a long term relationship, to partner with Native people, to see their dreams into fruition? These are the questions I want you to discern as I recount my interactions.

Last weekend I attended the SD Annual Conference of the UCC in Watertown. On Saturday afternoon, I went to a break-out session entitled *Issues in Indian Country*. The facilitator and panelists had identified three issues to discuss: 1. Healthcare; 2. Education; and 3. SD legislation. We never got to the third issue. After spending most of the session listening to stories of how difficult it is for Native people to access good healthcare, particularly on the reservation, the panel turned to the topic of education.

Now I want to focus on the snippet of the education conversation that resonated so deeply with me. The speaker was TB who is a reading teacher on the Cheyenne River Reservation. She is also the wife of BB who is the pastor at one of the Dakota Association UCC church's on the Cheyenne River Reservation.

As an educator, TB has been influenced by the work of Ruby Payne and Paulo Friere. Ruby Payne is a leading U.S. expert on the mindsets of the people within economic classes – poverty, middle class, and the wealthy. One of her books, “A Framework for Understanding Poverty,” is well known in the SF school district.

Payne's principal message is that poverty is not simply a monetary condition. She describes it to her readers and audiences as a culture with particular rules, values, and knowledge transmitted from one generation to the next that inform people how to live their lives successfully within that culture – how to build and keep relationships, how to get one's needs met, how to entertain and be entertained and so on. Payne asserts that children growing up in a culture of poverty do not succeed because they only know the “hidden rules of the poverty class,” but not the “hidden rules” of the middle class.

Let me give you an example. A person in poverty knows about the WIC program and how to use food stamps. A person from the middle class knows how to use a credit card, checking account, and savings account. They also understand annuities, life insurance, disability insurance, medical insurance, house insurance and so forth. A person from the wealthy class has preferred financial advisors, legal services, designers, domestic-employment services. They sit on the boards of charities. They know how to read a corporate financial statement and analyze their own financial statements. There are hidden rules for operating successfully within each culture.

These hidden rules are just the tip of the iceberg. Payne says that hidden rules of class govern much of our immediate assessment of an individual and his/her capabilities. She asserts that not knowing the hidden cultural rules is often a major factor in an individual not moving upwards on a career ladder...or getting a position in the first place. Payne sees her education mission as opening channels of communication, making explicit the hidden rules of class at all levels.

TB has also been influenced by the work of Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. She had just read his *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This book explores how one teaches or instructs the oppressed. TB said that when she read it, with Ruby Payne's work as a backdrop, she came to realize that there are some things that only people from within a particular culture can teach other people within that culture. Someone from outside the culture can't come in and do it for them. To effect real change, to break the cycle of generational poverty, they need to do it themselves.

This is TB's dream. She wants to be trained as a trainer by Ruby Payne. She then wants to train other teachers on the reservation. As she talked, her dream grew. She would love to have Ruby Payne come to some central location in South Dakota and train a team of Native teachers from the various reservation schools who would then go back into their schools and train other teachers and administrators, with the eventual goal of reaching and affecting kids and their families. TB believes this could affect real change.

I approached TB after the session and said that her dream of this kind of training resonated with me and I thought it would with my congregation. She was encouraged by that and said, "Give me a date and let me talk to your people".

Ok, hold onto that story and that dream...and let me take you to a different conference. On Monday of last week, Sanford held a symposium that dealt with medical research on the reservations and cultural protocols. I went because I wanted

to reconnect with several of the presenters: GTE and KP, people I had worked with at USD, and CBC, one of the student leaders from those days. To my surprise, another former student, DC, was also at the symposium. GTE grew up on the Rosebud reservation but has lived in Vermillion for 30 years, works at the University, is a modern day medicine man, trainer, educator, consultants...he is one of those people who bridges the gap between Native culture and our western European culture. CBC grew up and now works in the health science center field office on Pine Ridge. DC is the Director of the Four Bands Healing Center on the Cheyenne River Reservation and lives in Eagle Butte, her home town.

The conversation I want to share with you is one I had with GTE. I have known GTE for 20 years. He has a part-time appointment at USD as the Native American Cultural Advisor. His job is to help retain Native American students by keeping reservation culture, rituals and customs alive for them as they make the transition to living bi-culturally.

I really like GTE and hadn't talked with him for 10-12 years. Between sessions, we had a chance to catch up and at some point, I shared TB's dream of affecting change in the generational poverty mindset on the reservation. He quickly affirmed what she was saying. He said that he works with Native people all the time...both old and young...teaching them how to open checking accounts...how those checks differ from WIC checks, how to budget and plan. He said most people living on the reservation have no idea about the basics of managing money and how it works in non-Indian culture because they don't really have money to manage.

In the course of this conversation, he shared one of his dreams. He said there are government food programs, like the WIC program, that gets food to reservation distribution sites, but it doesn't actually get the food to the people. He said, "My people are starving and they can't get to the food." He then recounted stories we all know...many people on the reservation do not have vehicles or reliable vehicles...or money to buy gas...it is third world poverty conditions in many areas of our reservations.

GTE's dream is to have centralized, refrigerated warehouses on each reservation where government food would be delivered, but rather than have the people come to the warehouse, the reservation would also have refrigerator trucks and drivers who load up the food and take it to the people where they live. Take just one more step to get the food to the people. GTE said this approach would also create some employment on the reservation...the program would require folks trained in the maintenance and repair of refrigerators, truck drivers, and warehouse staff.

To be honest, I don't know a thing about government food programs and how they work. Take the WIC program, for instance. I know what it stands for...Women, infants and children...and I know that it provides food...but I have never used it, applied for it, or gone to get food with a WIC check. I am culturally ignorant about a program that supports some of our most at-risk, impoverished people. And my ignorance gets in the way of my being able to fully communicate with and fully understand someone I admire and care about.

So, how do I react? Am I Paul? Do I just turn a deaf ear and move on in circles where I want to communicate and I know how to communicate...or do I stop what I am doing...put my agenda and very busy schedule down so that I can sit and listen and learn and dream with someone whose dreams are not so very different from my own, but whose context is worlds away from me?

This August marks the end of my 6th year with you. I believe I have heard expressed every single year since I arrived, a desire to reach out to our reservations. I don't know what people had in mind...maybe building sheds or painting churches.

This morning, I have shared with you the bare bones of two dreams. Both, if brought to fruition, would be life-giving to people who must surely feel nameless, unprotected, alone and forgotten.

My question to you, again, is do these dreams resonate in some way with you? Do you want to hear more? If the answer is "yes", are you willing to do what it takes to learn how to build an open, trusting, sustained relationship with Native American people on their land and on their terms? A solid relationship as defined within their culture? Are you willing to open up our dark, shared history and offer sincere remorse for the actions of our ancestors if that is what it takes to be in right relationship? Are you willing to commit to partnering in a dream that is not your own, may seem impossible, may take a long time, may shift and change and grow...but you'll hang in there to help bring the dream into fruition?

I have heard two dreams. I have two relationships. I am gently offering these two relationships as a starting point in building a partnership and I sincerely want to know if Spirit of Peace, as a congregation, wants to begin building and strengthening these relationships with me.

My friends, discern what you have heard this morning over the next several days and weeks, talk with each other, and talk to me. I believe we have the opportunity

to see a parable, of what the kingdom of God should be like, come alive in our own back yard. I believe we have heard the good news of God's salvation expressed from the margins of society. Shall we stop and listen? Amen.