

Westminster Sermon – Good Trouble  
Sunday, May 29, 2022  
Acts 16:16-34  
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Our first Scripture reading for today is Acts 16, verses 16-24. The Book of Acts, written by Luke, begins with the account of the Ascension of our Lord which is observed 40 days after the resurrection on Easter and 10 days before the arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost which we celebrate next Sunday. The Book of Acts highlights the events that follow the Ascension and Pentecost including the conversion and missionary journeys of Paul. In chapter 16, Paul and his colleague Silas bring the gospel to Europe for the first time, and the first European convert is recorded-- Lydia, a woman of independent means and a wealthy merchant of fine purple linens. She and her household are baptized, and her home becomes the center for the People of the Way in Philippi. This morning's reading continues the story of Paul's time in Philippi, beginning with the healing of a slave girl who has the spirit of divination or fortune telling. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*16 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. 17 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." 18 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. 19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. 20 When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews 21 and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." 22 The crowd joined in attacking them and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. 23 After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. Amen.*

Our second scripture reading concludes the story of Paul and Silas' experience in the innermost cell. The detail of the innermost cell added by Luke may be a reference to the Holy of Holies, an inner most room in the Temple where the priests were in the presence of Yahweh. Hear now the word of the Lord.

*25 About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 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. 27 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. 28 But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. 34 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. Amen.*

The title of sermon: "Good Trouble"

The text: ... *19 But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. Acts 16:19*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, for the times we have the courage to risk trouble in proclaiming your good news, we give you thanks. As we reflect together on your Word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

I think it is fair to say that Paul and Silas had gotten themselves into some "good trouble" that day in Philippi when they found themselves imprisoned for healing the slave-girl. The phrase "good trouble" is associated with the late U.S. Representative John Robert Lewis. The son of a sharecropper growing up in rural Alabama, Lewis said as a little boy his parents and grandparents used to tell him "Don't get in trouble." Nevertheless, as a young man Lewis was inspired to activism by the Montgomery Bus Boycott that started when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.

In his own words: "Rosa Parks inspired us to find a way, to get in the way, to get in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble. And I've been getting into trouble ever since...When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something. Our children and their children will ask us, 'What did you say? What did you do?' Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society."

Congressman Lewis' learned good trouble from the generation before him who risked imprisonment by partaking in non-violent, civil disobedience. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that people have a moral responsibility to break unjust laws and to take direct action rather than waiting potentially forever for justice to come through the courts. In his letter described as one of the most important historical documents penned by a modern political prisoner, King writes "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

One of the great preachers in the twentieth century, The Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin served as chaplain at Yale University before becoming the senior minister of New York City's Riverside Church. Coffin was well known as an advocate for Civil Rights, a voice opposing the Vietnam War and a participant in good trouble. When Coffin found himself in a jail cell following an anti-war protest in Washington D.C., he joined in the tradition of Paul and Silas by singing hymns and praying. His resolute baritone voice filled the prison as he sang Handel's Messiah. Others in the cellblock soon joined their voices.

Journalist James Carrol who was in that jail with Coffin reflected on his experience. He wrote, "As you listened you suddenly felt awash in an unexpected gratitude, for you realized that those words expressed your deepest faith. And that sung as they were, those words had an absolute integrity that far transcended your fearful hesitance. You did believe that your Redeemer liveth, and, more than that, you believed that your Redeemer had stood upon the earth with you, bringing you to that most unlikely place. You saw, indeed, that you belonged there, in that cellblock, and that you were plenty strong enough for whatever lay ahead."

The prison bars that contain the body cannot suppress the faith or spirit of the one who is there because of good trouble. There is something empowering about good trouble, about doing what is right, about being true to one's beliefs, about speaking truth to power, about advocating for the oppressed and victimized. We saw this is the character of Mattie Lawrence in the Suffrage Play: Rising Up over Mother's Day weekend. Her character, played brilliantly by our own Ann Collins, was based on the life of Susan B. Anthony who was imprisoned for voting as a woman before the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

If I played by the rules of the Reformed Church of America which at the time barred women from ordination and did not risk some good trouble, I would not have the privilege of standing in this pulpit today to proclaim the good news of the gospel.

The prisoners in the first century cell listened in wonder and amazement to Paul and Silas who could not keep from singing. Luke writes, *suddenly a violent earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison*. The earthquake is perhaps an allegory for the gospel displacing the status quo, changing our world and the way we see the world, and freeing us from the bondage of sin. *And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened*. Everyone is freed by the gospel...the powerful, the powerless, the guilty, the accused, the oppressor, the oppressed. When Paul and Silas' chains are unfastened, they feel no need to run. Neither do the other prisoners who have been freed with them.

When Paul realizes that the guard is about to take his life at the thought of being the one on duty when the prisoners escape, he calls out to him. "Do not harm yourself for we are here." It seems that Paul and Silas are freer than the guard who imprisons them...and their inner freedom that keeps them from running provides an opportunity for the guard to also share in the good trouble of the gospel, changing his world and the way he sees the world.

By the grace of God, by the strength of the Holy Spirit and at the name of Jesus, may we, like Paul, and Silas, like Susan, Martin, Rosa, John and William, risk trouble for the good news that is ours to share. Amen.