

Sermon – Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Sunday, June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34 and John 17:20-26

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Our Scripture reading for today is Acts 16, verses 16-34. 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. The pastors and Dale Rogers celebrated Ascension this past Thursday with a communion service as Concordia. 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 word for us today.

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] 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 Jews²¹ 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.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^[b] 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^[c] 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.

Paul and Silas choose "to stay" following the miraculous opening of the prison doors and the unfastening of their chains. The Ascension of the Lord commemorates the time Jesus chose "to go," to return to his Father. Our second scripture reading, John 17:20-26 is a portion of Jesus' prayer for the disciples before his death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus asks God to protect them and empower them with the Holy Spirit, whom God will send following his departure. Listen for God's word.

20 "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, 21 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. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, 23 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. 24 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. 25 "Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. 26 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." Amen.

The title of sermon: "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"

The text: ... *and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. Acts 16:26a*

Let us pray: Holy and Loving God, for the times we stay and the times we go in each of our lives and for your insight, inspiration, and encouragement in these decisions, 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.

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

This song by the English punk rock band, the Clash, was written in 1981. Following the inspirational lyrics and social justice themes of the late sixties' rock music, then the superficial glitz and dancing beat of disco, the Clash was a part of a new British invasion that brought simple-minded lyrics conveying profound truths. The pithy line, "Should I stay or should I go?" poses the recurring enigma which challenges us again and again throughout our life journeys. Should I stay in a relationship or go with another? Should I stay on my professional career path or go with a better offer? Should I stay with the status quo or go with change? The Ascension of the Lord commemorates the time for our Risen Lord "to go." Forty days following the resurrection, it was time for Jesus to leave the disciples behind and return to the Father. Jesus explains to his followers that it is to their advantage that he goes so that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, can be sent to teach, to empower, and to dwell within them.

As Henri Nouwen teaches in his book The Living Reminder: *The great mystery of the divine revelation is that God entered into intimacy with us not only in Christ's coming, living (and staying), but also in Christ's leaving, dying (and going).*

The characters in our reading today are faced with the dilemma of whether to stay or to go. We continue the reading from last week with Lydia, a wealthy and powerful woman, who decided "to go" with the gospel...she and her entire household listened, believed, were baptized and welcomed Paul and Silas into their home in a gesture of hospitality.

The spirit of divination in the slave girl chose "to go" in the name of Jesus Christ and came out that very hour. This is a conversion of sorts...in the paradigm of someone afflicted by what could be mental illness. Sadly, the child enslavement and trafficking Luke describes here continues to be an atrocity in our world today. If Lydia represented the powerful, surely the slave girl represented the powerless. God's spirit makes no distinction between the powerful and the powerless.

Following this miracle, the angry owners and crowd who want “to stay” with the status quo bring Paul and Silas to the magistrates who chose “to go” with the crowd’s demands and have them stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison. Luke adds the detail of placing them in the inner most cell...perhaps a reference to the Holy of Holies, an inner most room in the Temple where the priests were in the presence of Yahweh.

During their imprisonment in the inner most cell Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns to God. The prisoners who represent both the guilty and the accused listen in wonder and amazement. Suddenly a violent earthquake shakes the foundation of the prison. Perhaps for Luke, this is 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 and the accused. Once again Paul and Silas are confronted with the dilemma, “Should I stay or should I go?” Ironically, not only Paul and Silas but also the other prisoners choose to stay.

When Paul realizes that the guard is about to take his life at the thought of being the one on duty when the prisoners GO, he calls out to him. “Do not harm yourself. We did not go, we stayed!” It seems that Paul and Silas are more free than the guard who imprisons them...and their decision to stay provides an opportunity for the guard “to go” with the gospel, changing his world and the way he sees the world. Like Lydia, he and his entire household listened, believed, were baptized, and welcomed Paul and Silas into their home in a gesture of hospitality. Like the Good Samaritan, the guard washed the wounds of Paul and Silas.

And so this New Testament story affirms the truth that “freedom” can be found in staying as well as in going. Often, freedom gives us the power “to stay” rather than “to go.” Faith and freedom give us the fortitude to stay the course, to remain steadfast neighbors, to wash one another’s wounds, to extend hospitality, and to become all God calls us to be. Too often our decision “to go” is based on fear or insecurity, the belief that we are not welcome, loved or good enough. Too often our decision “to go” is based on the myth that the grass is greener on the other side; however, inevitably the demons we face in our present circumstance show their faces wherever we go. On the other hand, if we choose to stay and confront our struggles within the inner most rooms of our lives, by singing hymns, by praying, and by coming face to face with our fears, the foundation of our lives can be shaken, the bonds that hold us back can be loosened, and the way we see the world can be changed.

Surely there is a time to stay and a time to go for each of us. During this season of graduation, we celebrate those who had the wisdom and discipline to stay the course of study and who are now prepared to go out into the world. As we share in the sacrament of baptism and celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit who will “go” with Nora and Piper in their lives, we give thanks for their parents and for this faith community who will “stay” with them on their journeys and help them face the recurring enigma: “Should I stay or should I go?”

By the grace of God, by the strength of the Holy Spirit and at the name of Jesus, may we, like Paul, Silas, Lydia, and the guard, know when to stay and when to go. Amen.