

Sunday, May 8, 2016
Meditation – “The Gift of Privilege”
Scripture Reading – Acts 16:19-40
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We gather today to present Bibles to our third graders, to break bread together in Holy Communion and to honor our mothers. In our Christian calendar, today is the seventh and final Sunday of Easter. Christ’s ascension to the Father was this past Thursday and next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, ten days following the ascension and fifty days following Easter morning.

Our Scripture reading for today is Acts 16, verses 19-40. Acts, which is written by Luke, records Pentecost and the events that follow highlighting 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, 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. Paul heals a slave girl who has the spirit of divination or fortune telling. Our reading begins with the sequence of events that followed this miracle.

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, the jailer 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 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 Paul and Silas spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 At the same hour of the night the jailer 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. 35 When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." 36 And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves." 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; 39 so they came and apologized to them. And the magistrates took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, Paul and Silas departed.

The title of the meditation: “The Gift of Privilege”

Text: “The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them.” Acts 16:38-39a

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you for all who use their privilege as a gift to protect those who are exploited in this world. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Last Mother’s Day I shared some of my mom’s words of wisdom over the years. Today I would like to add another one from her repertoire. Our son, Paul, recently quoted this saying in his Hope College Life View paper: “There is a reason,” my mother and Paul’s nanni often says, “God didn’t put a window in your forehead!” In other words, use your filter, dear ones; do not say whatever comes to your mind and without thought of how it will affect others. Think before you speak and learn to weigh your words, both personally and professionally. Or as the preacher in Ecclesiastes put it: *There is a time to speak and a time to keep silence.*

I find this timeless advice timely in light of Paul’s interactions throughout this chapter. He reveals he is a Roman citizen only after his rights have been violated (being denied due process) and the privilege of his citizenship becomes a bargaining chip as he negotiates with those in authority. The notion of Paul using his privilege as a gift to protect others was first introduced to me by the Dr. Kenneth Bailey, an author, linguist, professor of theology and ordained Presbyterian minister who lived and worked in the Middle East for over 40 years. He was actually born in Bloomington, Illinois.

Dr. Bailey points out in his video series *A Middle Eastern Perspective on Women in the New Testament* that Paul knew the magistrates, who had them stripped and beaten, were making a serious mistake precisely because of their Roman citizenship. Something they were never asked about and did not feel compelled to reveal at the time. Paul waits to make his announcement at the point that they want to secretly release them. And Paul uses this opportunity to bring the magistrates, who come to offer Silas and him a personal apology, to the home of Lydia on their way out of Philippi. Paul wants to remind the magistrates that this household of believers, led by a woman, needs special protection. Bailey, with his vast knowledge of the Middle Eastern culture infers that in essence Paul is saying that as long as this early congregation is protected Paul will be happy not to bring charges against them for the unfortunate oversight of their privilege as Roman citizens.

With that seed planted in my mind, I read this lectionary passage with great interest and I saw this theme of using “the gift of privilege” to protect the exploited woven throughout the design and pattern of the text. It begins with the healing of the slave girl who knows no privilege and, who is also enslaved by a demon. The fact that she was being exploited by her owners for the money she brought them is apparent in their outrage upon her healing.

Paul and Silas endure the flogging and go to prison, not as downtrodden victims but as two Roman citizens who know they have done the right thing and who also know that their rights have been gravely violated. Empowered by the spirit of Christ, Paul and Silas pray and sing hymns in their confinement. That’s when the earthquake happens and their chains fall off.

Assuming they have fled and knowing what happens to jailers who allow their prisoners to escape, the guard is about to do the honorable thing and take his own life when Paul calls out to him to

stop! Ironically, Paul and Silas are freer as prisoners than the guard who holds the key to their cell. They assure him that although their chains have been removed, they will stay because of their concern for his life. The guard is amazed by their composure and compassion; he welcomes them into his home, washes their wounds, shares a meal, and like Lydia, chooses to be baptized with his whole household into the freedom of Christ. Once again we see Paul risking his freedom to protect one who has few privileges in a society where, not unlike ours, those lower in the social structure unfairly bear the brunt of responsibility for the injustices in our midst.

I would have liked to see the look on this guard's face when Paul announces he is a Roman citizen, refuses to be released in secret, and requests that the magistrates come themselves to apologize. Somehow, in my mind's eye, I can picture Lydia, the slave girl, the guard and their families reminiscing over the years and telling the story with great delight of Paul's first visit to Philippi and the day the magistrates came to their house.

We are not surprised to read that the Philippi congregation welcomed men and women from all walks of life, respected each other as brothers and sisters regardless of their social status in the Greco-Roman world, and used their privileges as well as their resources to empower and to protect one another. In America, we celebrate the long legacy of privileged Presbyterians who shaped our democracy, promoted due process, and advocated for social justice across the generations...who understand that *Those to whom much is given, much is expected.* (Luke 12:47)

As we gather at the table of the One who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, let us each consider the privileges we enjoy in our respective lives, as citizens of the United States of America, as men, as women, young and old, with degrees, memberships, professions, wealth, and friendships. In what ways are we using these privileges as gifts to reach out to the underprivileged in our society and in the world? In what ways are we teaching our children that privileges are gifts only when they are used to benefit those who have less?

As we consider our privileges and ways to use them creatively, discretely and lovingly, we give thanks today for the gift of privilege, for the possibilities before us, and for the mothers who have born us and shaped our lives. Alleluia! Amen.