

I had an amazing trip to the St Louis area this past week. Sitting on the deck by a man made lake, surrounded by green hills and lush trees, watching cardinals and robins and red winged black birds. I loved going to the small towns built in the late 17 hundreds. Brick buildings connected together, repurposed for shops and restaurants. Streets covered in brick and cobbles.

And then there is the river, actually the rivers. Both the Mississippi and the Missouri had overflowed their banks. So much so that street signs, road markers, parking lots, and houses appeared to be floating in the water. Roads were closed due to the flooding, parks, businesses, and streets were submerged.

And I found myself thinking about paddleboats on the river and life during the time of Mark Twain and Lewis and Clark. What was life like back then? What did they do when the river changed course? How did the farmers manage when the rivers exceeded their banks?

What will the farmers do this year as the ground has been too wet to plow? What will they do as the window to plant corn or soybeans narrows each day? How will they cope? Will they become sullen or angry? Will they take the loss of income and possibly the loss of their farms out on their families and loved ones? What will happen to the economy if it remains too wet to plant?

Sitting in the country, an hour east of St. Louis, I also found myself thinking about what it would be like to live in St. Louis. Outside of a visit to the botanical garden this trip and a trip to the zoo over 40 years ago, I have not spent anytime in the city. What issues are faced by those living in the city? How are communities divided or united? What fears fill daily lives? Fear of racial profiling, fear of being shot on the street, fear of having your home burglarized or being the victim of a car jacking? I wondered how people respond to such issues? Do they relate taking on an eye for an eye mentality? Do they ignore or avoid the problems that pervade the city? Or do they seek change through discourse and community action?

And as we all know, even the little things, like no air conditioning when temperatures are over 90 and the humidity is above 80%, can cause one to become sullen or angry or lethargic. I must admit I do not miss those sultry sticky days that is part of Midwest living.

I also found myself wondering what Paul and Silas were thinking as they explored Philippi? Philippi, a Roman colony, filled with people from all over the known world but who seem to be eager to be all things Roman. The people

appear to have little tolerance for anything that challenges their desire to be more than a colony. They disdain anything that keeps them from being more like Rome. And so they worship Caesar as a god and they indulge in seers and clairvoyants. And will do anything, including using another for personal gain to cash in on the gullibility of others.

And so it is that a clairvoyant, a slave girl, who is making lots of money for her owners, manages to get under Paul's skin. Even though her words are truthful, in calling Paul and Silas slaves of the Most High God, Paul wants nothing to do with her. Paul, in what comes across as being a bit of uncontrolled anger, calls the evil spirit out of the girl in Jesus' name. In the original Greek, scripture refers to the spirit in the girl as "a Pythian spirit." A reminder of the Greek myth of the fierce dragon, or snake, that guarded the Oracle at Delphi.¹ Paul recognized the spirit for what it was. Was this exorcism a violent act on Paul's part? Was it something that led to liberation of the slave girl, or would it result in her being dumped by her owners as she no longer had any value to them?

Naturally the girl's owners were outraged at this loss of future income. They responded by dragging Paul and Silas before the magistrates. Using the argument that Paul and Silas were advocating ways that were non-Roman, ways that defied the laws of the land, they managed to gather a crowd of like-minded individuals. A mob mentality set in. The call was for action and justice even though the real reason for their outrage was a loss of economic security due to the actions of Jews whose ways were not consistent with Roman pagan ways.

And so the magistrates, most likely out of fear of the mob or maybe because they shared the same biases as the mob, had Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in stocks within the bowels of the prison.

Most of us would be outraged by the lack of judicial process. How dare the magistrates acted as judge and jury without a trial. Most of us would have been demanding a call to our attorney. Most of us would have been complaining loudly or maybe would be hunkered down plotting how to get even.

Paul and Silas, as citizens of Rome, had every right to be enraged. But they did not did not rail against the system. In the darkness of their prison cell rather than feel they had been buried by events they chose to bloom. They sang songs of praise and lifted up prayers to the one true God. In the process they shared their faith with their fellow prisoners as their voices echoed through throughout the

¹ The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes: Vol X, (Nashville; Abingdon Press, 2002), 232.

prison. They had taken this most inopportune, unplanned moment, to hold on to their faith and share their faith.

And so when the cell doors miraculously opened and chains fell away during the earthquake none of the prisoners fled. They stayed and listened to Paul and Silas. Which is puzzling, as you would think everyone would have wanted to escape not just from jail but also from the rocks and wall that were shaking and crumbling around them.

We may also be puzzled by the actions of the guard. When the guard arrives he is ready to fall on his sword as he was convinced every prisoner had escaped. He was ready to fall on his sword out of shame as he believed he had failed in his duty and out of fear of retribution by the magistrates.² But Paul's words stay his hand. In return for saving his life, the guard, trembling with joy, takes Paul and Silas to his home. He cleans their wounds and offers them food. The guard then asks how he can be saved.

He reminds me of the Samaritan woman, better known as the woman at the well, who wanted to know how she can partake of the living water Jesus is offering. And so after listening to Paul's words about Jesus and God's amazing grace, having been saved in body, the nameless guard accepts God. Seeking salvation he is baptized and then has his entire household baptized.

Outside of Paul's exorcism of the slave girl, the events that followed were outside of the control of Paul and Silas. They hadn't planned to be arrested. They hadn't planned on spending time in jail. They hadn't expected an earthquake. I am sure they would have preferred to have not experienced the any of these things. Yet in all those unplanned activities they made the most of them. They took the time and had the fortitude to live their faith in word, deed and song. They shared their faith to help others come to know the peace and love they have experienced through their relationship with Jesus. They did not lose their faith during times of adversity. Rather they were joyful and celebratory.

There is a tendency, when we are in pain, when things don't go the way we want them too, or when we are feeling lost and alone, for us to question and shout at God. We may question God's presence in our lives rather than be willing to sit in the mystery that is God. In our despair we may feel unloved and so are unable to share our love of God with others. We all know of people who have prayed for

² Sacra Pagina: The Acts of the Apostles, Luke Timothy Johnson, (Collegeville; The Liturgical Press, 1992), 303.

healing for themselves or a loved one and then turned away from God when their prayers were not answered as they wanted. And so in their anger and sorrow they feel buried by life rather than seeing it as an opportunity to bloom and grow in a very different way.

Then there are those like Miss Clara. Clara was an amazing person. She was an encourager, she never spoke ill of a person, she always tried to find the good in others. She always had a smile on her face. Miss Clara died this week. The last couple of years were a trial as she lost a leg to diabetes and was wheelchair bound. But that did not deter her spirit or her desire to share God's love with everyone, even though she was in pain, even though she became hospitalized. She lived her faith, even in the face of adversity. She never lost her joy in or love for God. I believe this was because Clara let God take control, rather than live in fear of not having personal control. And so she was able to minister to those around her, even when life took her places she had never planned to go.

Spiritual Director and Professor, Jeannette Bakke, talks about the difference between our need for control versus our fear of letting God take control. She speaks of our need to be willful versus willingness when it comes to our relationship with God. In her words:

Willingness is the opposite of willfulness. Willfulness is being full of our own will and ways and the satisfaction in being self-made or self-controlled persons. Willingness is a chosen position of vulnerability that recognizes we are ordinary beings in need of God's love, companionship and guidance. It is an acknowledgement that we are not all we would like to be or all that God hopes for us ... even when it means giving up our ways in favor of what we perceive as God's ways.³

And so we should seek a faith like Paul's and Clara's. A faith that is willing to let God take control of our lives, using every moment in our lives, those planned and those beyond our control, to witness to God's love and mercy and grace. For we never know who may cross our path and who will hear our words or witness our actions. Hopefully what we do and say will help them to accept God's love and mercy for their own. Even when times are hard, even when things are confusing, may we keep our faith. May we remain joyful in times of adversity, remembering and celebrating that God is with us. Amen

³ A Guide to Prayer for all who Seek God, Jeannette A. Bakke, (Nashville; Upper Room Books, 2003), 213-214.