

ABIDE IN ME

Texts on Sunday, May 6, 2012

Acts 16: 16-40; John 15: 4-8

In more than half the books of the New Testament, someone is in prison. The word “prison” peppers the whole of *Acts*. Good people are being stopped, frisked, stripped, flogged, thrown into prison and charged with disturbing the peace. The peace! Not from the Bible did anyone fetch the notion that religion and politics don’t mix. The Bible turns that can over: True religion is *always* messing with politics because true religion has one account of power and glory, and politics has another account of power and glory, and these two accounts of whose will will be done on earth—they do not match and cannot merely co-exist. It’s a pious platitude that the faithful are imprisoned for what they believe. Power doesn’t give a rat’s whisker what fantasies fill your head. Power is worried by what you’re going to do on account of what you believe. If nobody much goes to jail on Jesus’ account anymore, maybe the fear of the law has overmastered the fear of the Lord. And don’t you know that power prefers it that way!

Many of you know that I was numbered among the twenty defendants on trial last week for our action of last October to stop Stop+Frisk, the policy of the mayor of this town and of his police to strike fear into every non-white man in the city on the theory that guns and drugs will be easier to control if all people of color are afraid of being violated by the police every day everywhere—fourth amendment be damned—and also afraid of occasionally being shot to death in their bathrooms and bedrooms and backyards like *Ramarley Graham* and *Trayvon Martin*—this, a stone-faced reminder that prison isn’t power’s only bullet. Stop+Frisk is city-sanctioned terrorism. To stop this, two dozen citizens stood in front of a Harlem police station last fall and shouted our hatred for this practice which degrades and destroys millions of men and degrades and destroys the law itself. For protesting and not moving—♪ we shall not be moved—we were arrested. We spent a few hours in jail then and forty on trial last week and were found guilty of disturbing the peace of this city with our disorderly conduct. For a small fee to cover some of the court’s huge costs, we were sent off without more punishments.

Let’s be clear: we did not suffer significantly; comforts not needed, except for those defendants who have often been stopped and frisked. We did not suffer significantly; rather, we aimed to signal significantly; to signal that our society is slipping down a steep slope of fear. The policies America is putting in place to protect us from the things we fear are unraveling the fabric of our society and rotting the framework of our best laws. The nation’s

president has signed into law a practice of the former president, making it now legal to declare any American citizen an “enemy combatant,” who therefore has no right to a defense and may be imprisoned for life without trial. This is the law of the land now, under this president. You think the other guy will lift that? Are you afraid—of the right things? Leaning hard on the everlasting arms, lovers of God and of God’s law now need to signal significantly that God is not mocked. Power and glory belong to God alone.

See this with me. The system of human power looks at threats to its machinery through the smallest frames possible. Guilt is assigned for crimes which take place inside minutes and seconds, the littlest frames the law can construct. This leaves the system of power free to ignore whatever is set outside its frames. Crimes that unfold over months and years and generations are just not crimes. The mass incarceration of people of color. The failure to educate the poor. The destruction of topsoil, the ruin of the food supply, the heating up the globe, the bankrupting of households by the millions. Are these not crimes? No! These are not crimes because the actions that cause them do not fit inside the tiny time frame chosen by the system of power to serve its basic needs. On this understanding, the judge in the case of the Harlem 20 acted correctly; indeed, could not have done otherwise than convict the twenty if he would honor the system we have employed him to serve, which only has eyes for crimes inside tiny time frames.

But now consider Paul and Silas. The slave girl was in a kind of prison, possessed by a demon that made her into a lucrative circus act. Paul freed her from her enslavement, her prison. But power does not appreciate it when workers are freed from their masters. Frustrated, the owners of the girl laid hands on Paul and Silas. The magistrates surrounded the owners with their power, and the mob surrounded the magistrates with its power. Does this sound familiar?

Now, power always assumes it sets its threats upon the final frame. It thinks it has the last word, the “sentence,” the judgment, rendered in pain, prison, even death. Always power assumes that if your body is bound by irons, you can’t do anything; and that if you fear to have your body bound, you won’t do anything. But here is the turning point. Since the system of human power is founded on fear, it is vulnerable to those whose faith causes them to fear God, not guns, not governments. People of faith are the awfulest enemies for those who bank on fear.

The story from *Acts* tells it true. The jailer was instructed to put Paul and Silas in the innermost cell and fasten their feet in the stocks. Maximum security, it surely seemed. So what do the two do, ‘round midnight? Sing!

♪ In prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts to them are winging
When friends by shame are undefiled
How can I keep from singing?

Then came earthquake to spring open all the doors and shackles of city-sanctioned terror. The story doesn't say it's a miracle—just that it's powerful; just that human powers are but a brass clasp on a daybook compared with the power of possibility coiled inside what faith in the Lord may ask be done.

Now, in ordinary power struggles, victory over my opponent brings opportunity for me. What movie hero does not spring into action when his fetters fail? But watch Paul and Silas. Their confidence reveals a new paradigm for power, for though their bonds of iron are broken, they are not freed from the bonds of love, even love for the enemy. They are still “slaves of the Most High God,” as the slave-girl knew. Therefore, when these apostles swing into action, they do not move—because they are already free. In the freedom of faith, they have all the time in the world to do what must be done. They are seeing through a frame infinite and eternal, a frame which renders pathetic the threats of those who can only bind and bury. The frame through which they look—and through which they would be seen—completely surrounds them surrounding the jailer and the prison surrounding the crowds surrounding the judges and the money makers and the slave traders. Seeing in this way, they are able to save the jailer who was desperate to death with fear. It is as if an angel shouted, *Everybody, stay where you are and put your hands in the air: God's got you surrounded.*

Do you believe it? Better: do you sometimes feel it, that God's got the whole world in those hands? If so, abide with me, says the Lord. When you are called to go where the trouble is, go faithful and fearing not, ready to trouble the waters and cause tyrants to tremble. And though you have liberty to leave the tight spot where you are bidden to serve, stay. Abide with me, says the Lord. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

Not for one moment do I think myself one who has lived deep into this abiding mystery, trusting that whatever we ask for will be done for us. But I am ready to learn with the church what it can mean to abide in our Lord; to sing we shall, we shall not be moved; to say with the prophet Jeremiah (8:21ff), “For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn—and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?” I am ready with you to proclaim with the apostle, “For God did not give us a spirit of

timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control.” (2 Tim 1:7) I want to remember that even after they were commanded to leave it, Paul and Silas stayed in that prison until finally their fortitude frightened the magistrates who came and apologized for the wrong they had done. (Acts 16: 35-40)

When you break the bread of communion today, when you drink the cup, may these words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer join you; words sent from prison where he sang and prayed and suffered hanging by Hitler in order to bring evil to its knees and truth to light inside an abiding mystery:

“[A Christian] has no last line of escape from earthly tasks and difficulties into the eternal, but must drink the earthly cup to the dregs—and only in doing so is the crucified and risen Lord with that person, and that person crucified and risen with Christ.” (Letters and Papers from Prison, p. 336)

Abide in me, says the Lord, and I will abide in you.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*