

Coming Out  
Acts 16: 16-34  
June 2, 2019  
Rev. Dr. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

Sometimes, things that seem like a really good idea in the planning stage turn out to present challenges no one thought of at the time of inception. Like worshipping outside on a Sunday morning! In April, when spring was in the air, it seemed like a perfectly good idea to plan to worship outside in God's good creation over the summer months: we could celebrate this outdoor space, we could see and be seen in our neighborhood, we could lower the threshold for folks wanting to check us out for the first time, we could enjoy an informal time of worship together in a new yet familiar place.

Of course, in the ensuing weeks, we began to think about how to actually make this happen! We had to ask: what do we need to make music out here? What instruments will we use? Who can play what? What do we know how to sing? We had to think about a sound system: we had one but where is it? Who knew that? (Turns out no one!) What could we use in its place? What would we sit on? Who would move chairs? What if it rained (or hailed or was too hot or....whatever!) What if the grass turned to mud? (look around you!) What if no one came?!

I know some folks began to wonder if this "great idea" several months ago was worth all the hassle and inherent risk now that we had to figure it out and do it. The truth is that each of our thoughts and actions have consequences; some surprise us and some teach us. Yet when we act in faith, God can use them, and us, for good.

That's what I noticed in this text we've read this morning; Paul and Silas had been preaching throughout what we now know as modern-day Turkey when Paul had a vision that invited him

to Macedonia, a Roman province that included Philippi and Thessalonica. It was in Philippi that they met Lydia, who became a believer, and who in turn, hosted Paul and Silas as guests in her house. All this led to the portion of scripture we've read this morning.

So here they are, on their way to the place of prayer, when they meet up with a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit that causes her to repeatedly call out when she sees them, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a new way of salvation." Evidently, she does this for days on end, so much so that Paul gets annoyed to the point of calling out the spirit who indeed leaves her. Good all around, right?!

Well, no! Here's an idea that *seems good* but has significant consequences, both good and bad! First off, the girl was telling the truth, right?! They *were* "slaves of the Most High God" and they were offering Jesus, a "new way of salvation." Well, it seems that while Jews would have found this a clear and respectful introduction to a potentially engaging conversation, those of pagan religious traditions would have assumed that *any* god they thought was the "most high" would have sufficed; so she *could* be understood to infer that Paul and Silas followed any god at all, not the God they were bound to serve. That's probably why Paul was so upset. Yet here's the thing: they didn't seem to anticipate the consequences of "saving" this girl.

This young woman was oppressed twice. First, she was a slave and secondly, she was possessed by a spirit. While Paul indeed does give her freedom from one, he does not liberate her from the other. Without the ability to foresee the future, she is of little value to her owners, for whom she had raised significant amounts of money. Yes, she was "free" from the spirit but as a result, even more bound by her captors! Her profitability had vanished! For her, this consequence wasn't necessarily a good thing!

Ever do something that you thought might help someone else, only to find it backfiring on you? Perhaps you grabbed the hand of an “escaping” toddler in a parking lot only to have the parent scold you for touching their child. Maybe you have offered someone food instead of the cash they requested only to be rebuked for doing so. You might have tried to lend a hand to someone who looked like they needed help only to discover they found your offer offensive and suggestive that they were not capable of accomplishing the task themselves. Sometimes what we think is best for someone, even someone who is marginalized in some way, may not actually be the best thing for them in the long run. In the same way, as much as we’d like to support our partner groups who share our building or welcome our physical neighbors into our fellowship, without knowing what they actually want or need, without understanding the consequences of our own actions, we might do more harm than good.

Which seems to be what happens here. Paul’s action of freeing the slave girl caused a hostile reaction by her owners and the authorities in the market place. What right did he have to mess in their business? Surely Paul didn’t anticipate all this! These folks bring charges against both Paul and Silas for disrupting their city, charges supported by the ensuing crowd who, taking justice into their own hands, stripped and beat them. About now I am thinking that Silas just might have regretted that Paul didn’t keep his big mouth shut!

As a result, Paul and Silas are thrown in jail. Jail itself wasn’t the punishment; jail was the place to hold them lest they escape before they were presented before the authorities to determine their innocence or guilt. The writer tells us that they spent the night singing and praying; and that in the course of this, something happens (an earthquake?) that breaks open the cells and frees everyone in the prison! Again, not expected consequences! By holding onto

their faith, by trusting God, they were recipients of whatever earthly grace literally took the house down! Just like when we are diligent in faithfulness and are rewarded by God's blessings! We just never know how our prayers might be answered.

Of course, the jailer, seeing the doors opened, assume the worse and prepares to kill himself, knowing that if the authorities discover he's lost all the prisoners *they* will kill him themselves. But Silas and Paul stop him, assuring him all are present and accounted for. The worst did *not* happen; in fact, the best did! Paul and Silas were people of integrity whose actions matched their words! This was an unexpected consequence from the jailer's perspective; so much so that he believes and asks to be saved! This was, perhaps not an outcome Paul and Silas anticipated during their night in jail but one they were grateful for as they welcome both the man and his household into faith!

The story continues when the authorities send word to release the prisoners only to discover that Paul and Silas won't leave. Not the result *they* expected. They come to find out that Paul and Silas are both Roman citizens, protected by law from the beating they suffered and ensured a fair trial *before* being imprisoned. The fact that they had been denied both of those rights meant that the *authorities* were in violation of the law, not them, an outcome *they* had not anticipated. As a result, the authorities had to publicly apologize to Paul and Silas, a testimony to all that neither these two, nor their faith, was a threat to the city.

Without a doubt, our words and actions have consequences, many of which we are unprepared for. Some of them are helpful, some not. But God uses all of them! Paul's words freed the woman of the spirit that possessed her, but they also endangered her and themselves.

In jail, Paul and Silas could have remained silent and subdued but their act of faith broke open the prison walls which led to new believers in God's household. All the prisoners could have walked away but they stayed, Paul and Silas to ensure that the truth about who they were and who they served would be understood. Because of this, others believed.

What we say and do matters! We came outside this morning because we wanted to see God in a new light: in the grass and the trees, yes, but also in the rowhouses and the street noise. We anticipated *some* of what it would mean to do this, but not everything. A few weeks ago, the Executive Director of the YWCA worshipped with us and her remarks afterwards about how we are seen by some in our neighborhood opened our eyes! We are *not* who they think we are; likewise, *they* are not who we think they are! We won't know each other unless we all take risks, unless we make our best efforts and then trust God to turn it into something good, something worthy of our faith and the faith of others.

Everything we do and say matters; we might not have any idea how. Our welcoming and affirming statement will be a gift to some and an offense to others. Our plans for our "Community Summerfest" in August will make some disgruntled and some delighted. But here's the thing: we are called to risk and to trust, to venture outward and inward. We can't do one without the other; both are required to live in faith. We will make mistakes. We will misspeak, offend, overlook. And we will also do things right: we will welcome those who many in Christians circles say are not welcome. We will listen and learn and grow.

Paul and Silas heard God's call and responded, as faithfully and congruently as they possibly could. Perfectly? No? Faithfully, yes! Their call is our call too: we are coming out: out of the prisons that hold us ideologically, physically, socially, emotionally. We are reaching out,

speaking truth as we hear and know it, inviting others to speak their truth too. We will get it right and we will get it wrong. But in the end, let it be said that we were faithful and that will be enough.