

“To Set the Captor Free”

a sermon on Acts 16.16-34
Sunday May 20, 2007
7th Sunday of Easter
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church
Heather W. Reichgott

A very funny incident happened in a jail in Matamata, New Zealand this week. The news article about it is called “Man Breaks Into, Then Out Of, Prison.” It appears that a bumbling intruder broke into an empty New Zealand police station and accidentally locked himself in a cell, but managed to smash his way out again just before authorities arrived. Sgt. Graham McGurk on Monday said the person broke into the deserted police station in the town of Matamata on North Island on Saturday night through the front office. The intruder went to the cell bloc, and was accidentally locked in when a self-closing door clicked shut.

As police rushed to respond to an intruder alarm at the post, the intruder used a wooden chair that was inside the cell to smash through a window — supposedly outfitted with shatter-proof glass — to freedom.

Arriving officers could hear the intruder, but he fled through the front of the station as police were closing in from the back, McGurk said.

"It was quite unusual. The offender has almost done the job for us, getting himself locked in our cell," he said.

It wasn't known why the person broke into the police station, and nothing was stolen, McGurk said. [1]

In the passage Carol read from Luke, Jesus proclaims that he's come to set the captives free. Liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, to proclaim a time God can be pleased with. They're words from Isaiah, but on Jesus' lips that day, they become Jesus' own words—setting the tone for the rest of his life. To set the captives free. Sounds like good news eh?

In the story from Acts, we hear that it might not be that simple. The gospel turns out to have something to say about the freedom of the captors, too. It's good news, for sure. It might also be bad news, and threatening news.

There are many kinds of captivity. We'll be shifting between them today. Some of these may resonate with you and some may not—so in these stories, listen for what God is telling you today.

One might be quite literally captive, in prison or as a prisoner of war.

One might be captive to an addiction or just a bad habit.

Poverty keeps people captive, by cutting off possibilities for a better life.

Some people feel imprisoned by a lousy job... being stuck in a work situation that exploits us is a form of captivity.

And then there are different ways we are captors. Some of them are obvious—like when I pay

taxes I think to myself, How much of this money is going to pay for places like Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib? I know that if we didn't pay for places like that they wouldn't exist.

And then there are people who work for us, who are stuck having to take orders from us, whether we're nice and understanding or not.

Families can do captivity as well, often in more subtle ways. The movie *Benny and Joon* tell the story of a brother and sister, age thirtysomething and twentysomething respectively. Joon, the sister, has schizophrenia. Their parents are dead, so Benny is Joon's only family. He devotes his life to caring for Joon, when he isn't working at the auto shop. Joon develops more and more of a desire to be independent of Benny, especially after she falls in love. Near the end of the movie, Joon yells at Benny, "You need me to be sick!" Benny is startled and shocked. Hasn't he made all kinds of sacrifices to be the caring big brother Joon needs? Well, that's exactly the problem. Benny's life has come to revolve around Joon. She feels like his prisoner, but he needs her just as much. After that argument, Benny agrees to help Joon move out of their house and into an apartment of her own. It means freedom for Joon, but it also means freedom for Benny—who now has to deal with the openness, uncertainty and new possibilities that have suddenly entered his life.

In the story from Acts we heard about a girl who's been taken captive twice. By the spirit that possesses her, and by the men who use her to make a fine living. The spirit recognizes Paul and Silas as servants of God. It testifies to their mission... loudly... day after day after day. (Just as in the gospels, demons and spirits recognize the servants of God much more easily than the people do.) Paul finally commands the spirit to come out of the girl, not as an act of compassion, but because he's become extremely annoyed. The spirit is gone. The girl, presumably, is free—being of no more use to the men who keep her. Though we never find out what happens to her. But then, the girl's captors have a problem. They have been freed. And all of a sudden their lives are full of uncertainty and confusion, freedom and new possibilities. There are many ways they could respond. So what do they do? Well, in their freedom, they end up just reverting to their old destructive patterns. They act like captors again. They have Paul and Silas thrown in prison.

That brings us to the jailer.

In the middle of the night, the earth shakes, and the very foundations of the prison fall down. It's not just a broken door, or a chink in the wall. The whole thing is shaken down. It's a miracle, right? God has decided to free Her servants by springing them out of prison! Just like God freeing the people from slavery in Egypt; just like Jesus' promise to free the captives! It's exactly the kind of miracle Jews and Christians hope for, the act of a God who loves to see Her people freed.

So the next bit of the story ought to be the bit where Paul and Silas praise God and run out of the prison, leading the rest of the prisoners in a gigantic happy conga line, right? And the jailer and the rest of the "bad guys" would be left behind shaking their fists, right?

Well, that could have been the next bit of the story. Luke would have been fine with writing down a story like that. It's marvelous, and heroic, and it certainly fits with the story of God liberating the captives. As it happens, that's not the next bit of the story. Paul and Silas, now that they are free, have choices. They and the other prisoners choose to stay put.

Why? Because of the jailer.

After the earthquake, the jailer thinks all the prisoners have escaped. Which means he's an utter failure at being a jailer. He's really going to get it. Terrified and ashamed, he draws his sword to

kill himself.

Paul and Silas have compassion for the jailer. The foundations of the prison crumble, and they... stay put. It's a rather comic act of grace, don't you think? God gives them freedom, and they say, OK, thanks, we'll use our freedom to be gracious to this jailer and stay put. They're there by their own choice, like that man in the funny news story.

So, when the jailer draws his sword, Paul yells out from the rubble: "Don't do anything bad to yourself! We are all here." We'd expect the jailer to be relieved, and to try to restore some kind of order among his prisoners. But no, the jailer is completely undone. He falls down trembling, just like those old prison walls have fallen down. He asks them, "What must I do to be saved?" Not, "What must I do to be safe (from the punishment I'll surely receive at the hands of my boss?)" He asks, "What must I do to be saved?" The jailer is converted, not only by the wondrous miracle of the earthquake, but by the quiet comic graciousness of the prisoners who remain, and stand before the jailer as peaceful freed men. So the jailer becomes a freed captor. He frees his heart from the prison walls and entrusts it to Jesus Christ. He invites his freed captives home for dinner. Gone is his fear of punishment—you can bet there'd be punishment for inviting your prisoners home, but now the jailer is unafraid of all that. He's a convert to Christ. He's a freed captor.

Sometimes, captors need more miracles and more compassion than captives do.

Sometimes, freed captives just need to run away and get the hell out.

But, sometimes, there are ways that freed captives can use their freedom to be peaceful and gracious and even funny so that the whole system that held them captive can be converted. And, sometimes, there are ways that captors can do the same thing.

What are the doors of our lives that God wants to spring open?

How might God be using us to set others free?

Are there places where God is already at work, and all we need to do is be comically gracious about it?

May God grant us
not just earthquakes and miracles,
but the true miracle of conversion—
so that the systems that hold people captive,
and even the prisons of our own making,
might be broken open, crumbled to their foundations,
seduced and delighted by comic grace,
and converted to God's way of love and freedom.

[1] Associated Press article, Wellington New Zealand, 5/13/2007. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2007/05/13/international/>