

May 12, 2013 7th Sunday of Easter Acts 16:16-34

A judge was annoyed to find that his car wouldn't start. He called a taxi, and soon one arrived at his house.

Climbing in, he told the driver to take him to the halls of justice. "Where are they?" asked the driver.

"You mean to say that you don't know where the courthouse is?" asked the incredulous judge.

"The courthouse? Of course I know where that is." replied the driver. "But I thought you said you wanted to go to the 'halls of justice.'

Justice is an interesting perspective to use when approaching our Bible reading from Acts. We meet Paul and Silas who are doing ministry in the city of Philippi. This is the beginnings of the church that later receives the letter we call Philippians. Anyway, things are going fine for Paul and Silas. They've set up a routine of regularly going to a place of prayer where they apparently preach and teach. They've already attracted some followers - we read about the conversion of a woman named Lydia last week. No one is making a fuss about this at all.

But then Paul gets annoyed at a slave girl who has this spirit of divination. Whenever Paul and his companions pass by

she cries out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." In our world today we may not know what to do with the idea of someone having a spirit of divination, but... of course she is exactly right. Paul and Silas are proclaiming a way of salvation.

So why does Paul get annoyed? There are many theories and it is impossible to know. Some interpreters think Paul is trying to free her from her slavery to her owners. I myself tend to imagine this girl like the men who stand outside of Redwings games with bullhorns preaching about Jesus as people are going in for the games. I want to say to them, "Don't you realize you're hurting the cause more than helping it? You're turning people off. You're everyone's worst stereotype of a Christian." Of course there is no way to know for sure what upset Paul, but what we do know for sure what happens.

When this girl is no longer able to make money for her owners they get mad. Paul and Silas have crossed a line. And that's where the whole justice idea comes in. The Romans were somewhat fine with religious freedom. They'd tolerate just about anything - just don't disturb the peace and don't affect

the bottom line. As soon as money is involved Paul and Silas are in trouble. And look at the charges brought against them, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." Those customs didn't seem to be a problem when they're wallets weren't being affected!

This is really a clash between faith and the ways of this world. Now, we may feel a bit of righteous anger well up inside of us over this. We feel that once again money and greed are the root of a lot of evil. This anger may be flowing down well-worn channels in our emotions, but let's not be too quick to condemn. If we want to really understand Paul's and Silas' response to this we have to look more closely at this greed issue.

I often notice that it is easy to blame large corporations for being greedy and irresponsible. Or perhaps we blame political parties or systems for their corruption and exploitation. But let's not be too quick before we understand the big picture.

The New York Times Magazine ran an article in February about the way junk foods are designed to be addictive. Large corporations hire not only food developers but also psychiatric experts to help design foods that will make you crave ever more. The article generally blames the large food corporations for the weight and obesity problems in our country. But it also dares to cite the reality for the corporations too. Steven Sanger, CEO of General Mills points out the obvious for his corporation. General Mills does act responsibly and creates a whole variety of food products - from natural foods to diet foods to junk foods. But most often people bought what they liked and what they liked is what tasted good. General Mills has many stock holders who both expect and deserve a return on the investment they've made in the company. Deliberately doing what is unprofitable is therefore not an option.

How many of you with mutual funds and retirement investments are willing to say, "I don't care about a return on that investment. It doesn't matter. I don't really need that money to grow."

No, we're all in this together. The bottom line affects all of us. And Christian faith and the bottom line will often clash. So what do we do? Do we opt out of life? Do we reject culture? Do we cash in all our investments and refuse to participate?

Let's look at Paul and Silas for our answer. The magistrates have them stripped, beaten and thrown in jail. Are Paul and Silas trembling in fear for what will happen? Nope. What do they do when they're in jail? They pray audibly and sing hymns! Imprisonment isn't going to get them down. It's not going to get in the way of their faith. They are going to keep on going.

Then there is an earthquake. The jail breaks apart, but do they seize the chance to flee? Again, nope. They stay right there. Why don't they flee? Well, for one it would be a sure way to have a man-hunt start after them. But two, their jailor would have killed himself if they fled. The way they kept prison guards diligent about their duties in those days was to kill them if the prisoners escaped, thus there were few breakouts. Paul and Silas are expressing the confidence of

their faith by not taking advantage of a situation when so doing would hurt someone else.

By not doing so, what happens? The jailer and his household become Christians as well. Paul and Silas have turned a situation where the ways of the world were punishing them into something that could serve them.

If you want to know what to do when the bottom line and Christian faith clash, don't try to remove yourself from the situation so that you remain holy and pure and untainted. No, look for ways to make the bottom line work for you.

I think our second reading cuts off the story six verses too early because in the next six verses we really see how Paul and Silas use the situation to their advantage. Let me read those verses: (Acts 16:35-40)

When your faith looks like it's going to get you in trouble don't back down. Instead look for opportunities. You'll be surprised how many you find and how effective those opportunities can be. Amen