

May 8, 2016 “Conflict, Promise and Power” Acts 1:1-11 Acts 16:16-34

Conflict started the episode we heard from the second reading of Acts today. A woman was mentally ill, or demon-possessed. Somehow her condition had caught the attention of men who figured they could make money off of her. So they held her as a slave, and used her to make a profit through fortune-telling. Along came Paul and Silas, and the woman’s condition allowed her to see that they were filled with the power of the Most High God. Paul became annoyed at her, and ending up healing her by telling the spirit that was possessing her to leave her. Her handlers were outraged; she had been a money-maker but now was worthless to them. So they came up with some trumped-up charges against Paul and Silas, and had them thrown in jail. They were angry that their business was ruined.

Over the years I have heard folks suggest that the big pharmaceutical companies do not really want to cure cancer, and perhaps lots of other diseases, because their treatments are so profitable. To come up with a total cure would soon dry up their money. Not so different, in a way, from the men who were profiting from the slave woman’s illness.

For a minute, imagine that you are in prison with Paul, accused of false charges. There you are, at midnight, firmly shackled, still singing songs and praising God, trusting that God is with you. Suddenly, an earthquake strikes, enough of an earthquake to knock open all the prison doors as well as everybody’s chains.

What do you do? Do you and Silas run into the freedom God had surely provided for you? Or do you, when you see the upset of the jailer, who is about to kill himself because he knows his life is on the line since he is sure that some of his prisoners are escaping, stay and help the man?

I could see myself saying, “Thank you, God!” and running away from that jail as fast as I could get my legs to carry me.

But Paul and Silas did not run. They stayed right there and calmed the jailer with Paul’s words, “We are all here. No one has left.”

(Gleaned from www.umcdiscipleship.com) Paul and Silas didn’t try to escape when they could. Why? Probably because they understood that life in Christ is never about “each person for oneself.” It must always be about being the body of believers watching over others because of Jesus’ command to love. *All others*, even the jailer.

Suddenly their witness was bigger than just singing praise songs in a difficult situation! There was a whole different kind of power involved, the kind that made it possible for prisoners to decide not to run when given the opportunity. The jailer ended up taking them to his own house, and then the jailer and his entire household were baptized into the Christian faith.

There’s a lot of power in this story! The power of God freed the slave girl. The power of human greed fought against this power. The power of God opened the prison for Paul and the others. The power of God was made visible to the guard through the earthquake and, perhaps even more

powerfully, through the actions of Paul and friends. The power of God was put to work in the life of that guard as he risked believing in Jesus.

What does it take for a person to trust God so much that this kind of thing could happen? The Bible keeps telling us that God wants us to live out our lives totally trusting that the way of Jesus is right and the best way for us to live. But the “BUTS” come into our inner thinkings fast and furiously, and most of the time we end up not so sure. We want to be Christian, we want to really follow Jesus, BUT...

The refugees from Syria who are so desperately in need of places to live are a good example. The Bible is filled with warnings to us that God is going to judge us by how well we respond (or fail to respond) to the needs of those who are in need. In Matthew 25, Jesus made that painfully clear: “I was hungry, and you fed me; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was naked, I was in prison, I was sick...” If Jesus were telling that parable to us today, I believe that he would include, “I was a refugee, and you dared to offer me a place to live.” BUT, we are afraid, and we’re not so sure we’ll have enough for ourselves, and we’re worried about the economy and terrorism and all sorts of other things, so our BUTS keep us from fully living out our faith.

God must sigh. Since it’s mother’s day, I will take a bit of liberty now. My own hope, as a parent, has always been that my children will be there for each other when Woody and I can no longer do so. I celebrate my children’s many gifts, and their good health, but most of all I give thanks for the fact that they love each other and keep in touch with each other and enjoy each other’s company. My prayer is that this will always be the case, no matter how their lives develop.

Long ago, while I was in my first church, I witnessed a family where this was not the case. There were four grown children. The mother became ill and died, and the children came from their long-distance homes to be there for her funeral. The day after her burial, the four were in the living room, heatedly arguing over who should get what, even though their father was in the room with them. They became so ugly with each other that the father had a heart attack and died that day. After his funeral, the siblings never had any more than business dealings with each other; they remained estranged for the rest of their lives.

For the last few weeks we have heard Jesus’ message to his followers, “Love one another, even as I have loved you.” God is not shy about letting us know what is important: Put God first. Trust God, because God has PROMISED to be with you. Love your neighbor, as much as you love yourself. Dare to let your life be part of God’s Light shining hope and help in this world. By these things, we shall have abundant life and know first-hand the POWER our Lord wants to give us.

Some people think that life is a kind of prison. It certainly has its ups and downs, and its conflicts and uncertainties and disappointments and dangers. But just as that prison in Acts 16 turned out to be an opportunity for faith to reveal God’s power, so every day of our lives can be the same: an opportunity for God’s love and light to shine through our decisions and actions.

There will always be conflict and hard decisions around us and sometimes in our midst. There will always, within us, be the “buts,” the hesitation to trust God and to act totally in faith.

But there will also always be God's promises: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. (Isaiah 41:10)
"Remember, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20)

And there is our Lord's promise of power and purpose, given long ago to his followers and also to us, even this day: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses..., to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

Next Sunday is Pentecost, when we remember how the just-starting-out group of Christians received the Holy Spirit Jesus had told them about. As we go through this week ahead of Pentecost, perhaps we should take time to assess and review what our faith means, and what our lives mean for God. Are we willing to be witnesses to the living and acting God? Are we willing to try to reach out with Jesus' love for others? If we are willing, God will make us able.

The God who gave us life in the first place and who knows us and even so loves us offers us salvation. All we have to say is YES to receive it. Yes, Lord, send your Spirit upon me. We need forgiveness and healing, we need life in the face of death; we need conviction where now we are afraid and unsure; we need love where we don't think we can even care any more... These things are part of the life, the power, and the promise, offered through Jesus.

You have probably heard that during World War II, sailor George Frock wrote home the following to his family: "If you should hear that I have fallen in battle, do not cry. Remember that even the ocean into which my body sinks is only a pool in my Savior's hand." That's power. A larger perspective. God's gift to God's children.

May the truth of God's love free each of us to live a life as a witness and give us power, that the glory of Christ our Savior may shine in this world. Amen.