

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

“For you, O Lord, are most high over all the earth;  
you are exalted above all gods.” AMEN!

These last words from Jesus in the gospel,  
let’s be honest, are hard to follow.

This is the end of what Biblical scholars call  
“Jesus’ farewell discourse.”

His final speech the night before he was arrested,  
then rushed through the justice system and  
finally sent to the cross to be executed.

It’s the part where we overhear his prayer to the Father.

I’m so glad he wasn’t silent, but  
I wish it was easier to understand what  
he was praying to God in the room  
with his closest followers.

Jesus prayed for his disciples and  
he prayed for those who will come  
to believe in the love of God because of  
the things those same disciples will  
say and do.

That prayer runs down to you and to me.

I’ve come to simply see that these words are

complex because the relationship offered here  
is not simplistic.

It's not something that's personal;  
not something kept inside us and safe.

The thought, realization, or feeling might  
begin on the inside, but it's  
not meant to stay there.

And that implication... of stepping out,  
trying new things, standing up in  
the midst of powerful people who wish  
to run rough-shod over others is  
a hard thing to ask of  
the people you love.

Yet, there it is, plain as day. (Pause)

St. Stephen you are stepping out and  
trying new things.

You are standing up to powers  
that are hurting people in suffering.

(List examples of Grace Mission, Seminole Manor food  
pantry, and today we welcome Christians from the Holy  
Land to hear their story and support their artisans.)

We see God in these encounters  
and in the Book of Acts.

We pick up where we left off last week.

It begins where we left off last week.

Paul, Silas, and the others were  
lodging with Lydia, in her home.

On their way to the place of prayer a slave girl  
who had a spirit of divination began following them.

But (not only following) she was crying out in a loud voice,

“These men are slaves of the Most High God,  
who proclaim to you, a way of salvation.”

I bet it gave them a zap of energy to their egos!

You know, made them feel special.

Now, we should know that this “spirit of divination”  
is literally a “spirit of the python” associated with  
the Roman God, Apollo.

Apollo was Augustus’ favorite god so there is  
surely an underlying message about  
divine power here, but honestly  
it’s more entertaining to understand that,  
after this crying out occurred

for many days, Paul simply reached

the point of annoyance when he had to do something.

So proclaiming the name of Jesus Christ he ordered the spirit out of the slave girl.

Happy ending? No, sorry.

The girl's owners liked the way she was because, yep you know, she made them a lot of money.

You ever notice that?

Many people are fine and dandy with letting others say and do things, but if it affects the money they're used to getting.

Uh, uh! You better not.

People even defend slavery (and war) when it makes them a lot of money.

So there's a personal/financial reason Paul and Silas were arrested for "freeing" the girl;

her master's loss of money, but there was also a political reason:

Philippi was a Roman city that didn't want these Jewish Jesus Followers to be messing things up for them by talking about this

gift of Jesus Christ and sharing resources  
so that others are fed and cared for.

It's amazing how the more things change  
the more they stay the same.

We often see the ways crowds get riled up today  
just like they did back then.

The crowd joined with the authorities to  
strip and beat Paul and Silas.

It's sad for us that we never find out  
what happened to the slave girl.

It would be nice to know she found a place  
with Lydia or another of that prayer group,  
but we don't know. (Pause)

The story follows Paul and Silas into the prison  
and there we find the jailer locking them up in  
"the innermost cell" with shackles and chains.

The slave girl was in a tough spot and  
she was held captive,  
so now too are Paul and Silas.

But look at what they do.

Amidst their incarceration, with severe wounds,  
and being chained, they pray and sing,

and “the other prisoners were listening to them.”

I imagine too that the jailer listened as well.

Now, you’re probably like me, thinking...  
what would you or I have done?

Be angry at the injustice?

Wonder how to get a message to for help,  
maybe even (after some time) look for  
a way to escape?

Praying and singing hymns? :-/

Maybe in the top ten, but I’m even skeptical about that.  
(Pause)

Being in a tough spots can lead us to either say,  
“It’s all going to be fine” or we might hear  
directions to pound the pavement,  
and keep going.

You know, just get it together.

I don’t know, but (in this case) neither of those  
sound right,  
but it’s in these moments when we might hear  
what’s proclaimed in  
the Revelation reading:

The Spirits calls out, "Come."  
Let everyone who hears say, "Come."  
And let everyone who is thirsty, come. (Pause)

More than anything else, Edward wanted God  
to forgive his daughter, Sarah.

Edward also wanted to find peace within himself  
so that he could forgive Sarah for taking her own life.

Months passed after the tragedy,  
the questions persisted and the fear within  
was that his daughter was lost forever.

That's what his church taught.

His heart was so broken he couldn't  
even speak his daughter's name.

Then, on a drive with his friends into the mountains  
he turned to tell them about a dream  
he had had a few nights ago:

I saw someone ahead of me walking at a distance.

The person was wearing  
my daughter's favorite ball cap.

One I'd given her when she was a little girl.

I came closer and it was Sarah.

I followed her a little more not wanting  
to get too close or  
let her slip away and then I looked and  
saw a man come alongside her.

He also wore the same ball cap.

The man with the hat took my daughter by the hand,  
and even though I couldn't see his face,  
I knew him.

It was Christ.

Jesus' hand and presence was overflowing  
with welcome and he guided Sarah  
to come with him.

Edward told his friends he didn't know  
if his dream was wishful thinking or  
a sign of his state of mind, but he was  
certain that something had melted within him -

his anger and fear were gone.

Strange gifts like dreams and prayer and  
singing of hymns bring comfort that  
surpasses understanding...  
melting away fear and anger.

When we experience prayer and singing of hymns



they have the transformative power  
to awaken the Christ inside us.

When we share the experience with others,  
it may awaken the Christ inside them, as well.

Even jailers can become healers.

Verse 33 said, “He (the jailer) took them  
(Silas and Paul) into his home and  
washed their wounds.” (Pause)

Beloved, have you ever had something  
happen to you that you couldn’t explain?

You could be like Paul, Silas, and even the jailer  
and come to know God’s love. (Pause)

The true message Jesus followers carry is that  
even in our wretchedness God loves us  
and others.

Not in some distant way but in a personal way  
like that of the perfect parent.

Knowing that love urges us to follow the Spirit  
into strange places and encounter new people,  
even when we can’t answer every question,  
we’ll know when we meet God’s love.

AMEN!

