

Acts 16:16-35 Pastor Bill Uetricht 6/02/19 & Easter

Not that long ago, some political figure gave this advice to people who were running to become president: “It’s all about the economy, stupid!” The notion was that people tended to vote on the basis of the condition of the economy. The economy is a big deal.

Graduates, as you go into the future, you and others are thinking about the economy. You are thinking about *your* economy. Your parents are thinking about their economy. We all wonder about your contributions to *the* economy. At your parties and other opportunities for conversation with you, people are going to ask you what is next, what does this graduation mean for further education, and thus for preparation for a job, which obviously will bless a lot of people’s economies—especially the parent’s economy.

The economy is a big deal. For some folks, it’s all about the economy. Now graduates, we hope that you are on the edge of something big for yourself, something that might even have good economic implications for your life. But I got to tell you this. Sometimes this Christian journey isn’t always a boom for the economy. It can mess with the economy. Honestly, sometimes it can mess with the systems of which we all are a part. Sometimes this following Jesus stuff isn’t always good for those systems, for the economy.

Today Paul and Silas have made their way into the city of Philippi. They are looking for a place where people gather for prayer, and while doing so they come across a woman who can predict the future and who has been enslaved by some men who know how to capitalize on her ability. Maybe this woman has what we might call a mental illness. Ancients thought that such people were possessed by demons, and honestly, these were vulnerable people who could easily be taken advantage of. And what could be more advantageous, a better money-making scheme than one which taps into the human desire to know what we cannot know, our wish to transcend their ordinary humanness to figure what tomorrow will bring? You can make big bucks off of

vulnerable people with disabilities and vulnerable people who can't stand, can't stand not knowing what is going to happen tomorrow, can stand having to live not by certainty, but by trust.

Now, the young vulnerable woman is fixated on the presence of Paul and Silas. And so she keeps proclaiming the *same* message day after day about them. Some vulnerable people can become like that. It's part of their disorder. They sometimes say things over and over and over again. And sometimes you feel like you just can't take it anymore. Paul couldn't take it anymore. She was annoying him. So in response to his annoyance, and I hope because of compassion, or maybe a little of both, Paul performs an exorcism. In the name of Jesus, the demon was cast out.

Now you would think that this good news—the good news of the woman being freed up by the demon--would end the story. Freedom is a great thing, what we all are seeking. But freedom has unsettled the economic system of the men who held the young woman in slavery. They were making big bucks off of her. Her being well disrupted their little sick economic system. The economy took a hit because she was free. And the economic actors respond by making sure that Paul and Silas can't keep continue this freedom-giving work. So they are thrown into jail. Freedom isn't always welcome.

You got to get this. Sometimes in life, the systems we are a part of don't know what to do when people get better. Some systems rely on people not being well. You can see this in some alcoholic families. The system got used to the alcoholism. And when the alcoholic gets better, the system protests. Some family members will work to keep the person sick so that the system stays the same. Some parents will work to keep their children dependent upon them. They don't want to set them free. It's strange, but it's true. Being well, living in freedom, is a threat to some people and to many systems.

When in your own life you discover that you don't need the latest and the greatest, that you don't need to be addicted to what the economic system says you must have in order to be happy, you will find

a freedom that is a threat. The economic system will be bothered by you, and perhaps so will your neighbor and family members. What do you mean you don't need that? Those are the things that prove you have made it. We want to look good. We want you to look good. After all, our worth is determined by our looking good, keeping up with the Jones'.

Not so in the kingdom of God. Not so in this movement that is centered on Jesus, the one whose name sets us free. We are free from the power of the neighbors, the Jones, the culture, the economic system to determine our lives, our worth, our identity. The decisions we make don't have to always be about the economy, about what is going to get us the most money, give us the largest number of toys. We can choose careers, pathways, and living arrangements that are about the difference we can make in the world, not simply about what is going to give us the biggest bank account. In Christ we are free. We are children of God. Our worth is a gift from God. We don't have to earn it. We don't have to achieve it. We simply receive it. We're set free!

Funny, though, isn't it, that the practitioners of freedom are tossed into jail and are placed in the innermost cell, having their feet fastened in the stocks? Freedom is a threat. Note, though what the ones who trust freedom do while they are in jail. At midnight, Paul and Silas are praying and singing songs. This is what real freedom looks like. The big, bossy systems try to intimidate people and make sure that their victims kowtow to their powerful antics. But free people sing songs, nonetheless. They will not be intimidated. The American slaves knew that. The spirituals were freedom songs. Although enslaved, the slaves were free. And their songs bore witness to their freedom.

This freedom thing is tricky. Some of the freest people are folks who on the surface may look somewhat enslaved, but who, nonetheless, know a freedom that is much larger than their circumstances or the intimidation that other people enforce on them. Some of the most powerful people aren't people who have power. In

fact, some of the people with power can be pathetic. They can be so addicted to themselves, addicted to maintaining their power that they become in the deepest sense not powerful at all. They become slaves themselves.

The story of Paul and Silas in Acts reveals where the true power of life is to be found. After these jailed-but-free guys start singing, an earthquake occurs, one so violent that the “foundations of the prison were shaken, all the doors were opened,” and all the chains of the prisoners were unfastened. So much for the power of the powerful! True power is not discovered by bossing people around, by enslaving others, but rather by living in the freedom that God brings, the world-shaking freedom that reveals in the end how truly unfree power mongers can be. God is on the side of freedom, even if that freedom unsettles the economy, even if it shakes everything we have known to be true, even if it bursts open the doors that we have used to keep life and people under control. God is in our midst wanting to set us free. Paul and Silas live out of that freedom. They don’t run out of the jail when their stocks and the doors are broken open. No, they hang around. They are not intimidated. They are truly free.

The jailer, the one in control of the control system, is so taken by the power that he experienced--a power that initially threatened him causing thoughts of suicide--that he seeks Paul and Silas outside of the jail and asks them, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” In light of this world-shaking event, in light of the freedom and different kind of power that you have, how can I share in all of this? I’m frightened, but I am also amazed. I want what you got.

And so the jailer trusted, trusted in the Lord Jesus! He and his entire family were dunked. They were immersed in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus. That story became their story. The freedom of that story became their freedom.

Here’s the deal, folks! In Jesus we are set free. That’s going to unsettle some people, challenge the systems we are a part of, even affect the economy. But you got to know this: there is true **freedom** in

freedom. In one of the best Dixie Chicks songs ever we hear of “wide open spaces.” That’s what freedom brings. Wide open spaces! For the Dixie Chicks, it’s “room to make a big mistake.” For us, it’s that: room to make a big mistake. But it’s also much more. In freedom we meet the Big, we encounter God, the one who shakes our little worlds and yet settles them and us with salvation, with what we are truly seeking in life.

In God, we are well. In God, we truly have what we need. Wow! If you get that, you might unsettle somebody’s economy, especially those economies that try to control people. But your life, nonetheless, is going to be a whole lot more fun, a whole lot less anxious, a whole lot more in keeping with the one we call Lord, a whole lot freer!