

## **Disrupting Power**

June 1, 2025 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Acts 16: 16-34*

The early Christian leaders have been arrested again! In the first week of our Easter series, the apostles were imprisoned by the religious leaders in Jerusalem for healing people and for teaching. Now this week, in another time and place, Paul and Silas were thrown in jail by the Roman magistrates after they disrupted the financial gain of the owners of a slave girl. Challenging power is a very ancient story – whether it's religious power or political power or economic power – and it is definitely risky, and exhausting, and confusing!

How has it felt, these six weeks, reading stories from the early Church? Have you missed the familiar gospel stories of Jesus -- the well-known parables, and healings, and miracles, and teachings? Have you missed the more recognizable locations of the Sea of Galilee and Bethany and Jerusalem? Our readings about Tabitha and Peter were set in Joppa and Jerusalem, about 40 miles apart in Israel: Jerusalem inland and Joppa on the shore of what we know as the Mediterranean Sea. The Romans called it Mare Nostrum, which is Latin for “our sea”, as they controlled the land around all sides of it, from the east to the west, the north to the south, including the location of our stories from Acts, in Syria, and Turkey and Greece and Italy.

Within the book of Acts, chapters 15-18 cover what scholars identify as Paul's second missionary journey during the years 49-52, two decades after Jesus' ministry. Over three years, they travelled more than 1200 miles north and west to the Greek city of Philippi, which Luke describes as a leading city of the Roman district of Macedonia. They stayed in Philippi for about three months, leaving us a few stories from their time there.

After they met Lydia and baptized her household and stayed with her, as we read last week, they next encountered another young woman.

However, unlike Lydia, who was a dealer in purple cloth, and in charge of her own household, this girl is described as a slave girl who had a “spirit of divination” and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortunetelling. Where Lydia was an independent small business owner and entrepreneur, this girl didn’t control any of her life or livelihood, and anything she earned enriched only her masters. For several days, she followed Paul and Silas around, calling out that they were slaves of the Most High God, and were proclaiming a way of salvation. It’s interesting that she calls them slaves – it’s almost as if it’s the only way she knows that people can relate to each other. She was a slave of her master and they were slaves of theirs.

For some reason, all of this annoyed Paul. Throughout the gospels, when others confess their faith, or recognize God’s grace, they are praised and celebrated. But not this young girl. When she proclaimed that they were preaching a new way of salvation, Paul put an end to it. Paul saw it for what it was, and commanded the spirit, as Luke says to “come out of her.” If you’re thinking this sounds familiar, Jesus called out evil spirits also, in Luke’s 4th chapter, when he healed the man with the unclean spirit, and then in chapter 8 when he sent a legion of evil spirits into a herd of swine, who promptly ran off a cliff into the sea. For Jesus, as well as for Paul, disrupting the profits of either slaveowners or swine farmers was not popular. The people of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave town, and Paul case landed in prison. Acts doesn’t tell us what happened to the girl at all.

People who hold more than their fair share of economic power are easily threatened. They put up a strong façade, but deep down, ... It’s very easy to try to imagine if it would be easier if one person were in charge: one righteous, holy, benevolent ruler, one good billionaire, always doing good, always knowing what’s best. Would they manage the people fairly? Is the problem in all of these stories that

the one in power is abusing that power? Or is the system the problem?

The earliest Christians challenged the system, bringing the good news of God's love to a world that had nearly lost hope. However, just a few centuries later, the old model was back. It was just that the Church was the one with the power. The characters had changed, but the model persisted. The system is not easy to change. We want to hold on to the familiar, even when we know it's not working. This leads me to the work of Ron Heifetz. If you've read his work, you know why! He distinguishes between the times when we need a "technical fix" – solving a problem using a straightforward solution that we already know how to implement – and an "adaptive challenge", when we need to address the underlying system, and change the way we do things.

If I get hurt playing soccer, I can put ice on a sore leg, or decide to stay out the box during corner kicks, but I could also avoid getting hurt by not playing. If I had to do that, I'd miss my friends, and the exercise, and the joy of playing a game I've played for more than four decades.

Or to apply Heifetz' ideas another way – for a long time growing up, I thought that the Civil War had ended slavery. As a young child growing up in the 60s, I was vaguely aware of civil rights issues, learned and love the peace march songs, and knew that we had work to do. But clearly, racial justice and plantation society is an adaptive challenge, not a technical fix.

What's interesting is that as gains were made in affirmative action and equal opportunity and integration, and interracial families in the 60s and 70s, at the same time, the rise of corporate power and mergers meant that the lives of more and more people were controlled by corporations. Meanwhile, the growing prison system of mass incarceration trapped more and more people, both those imprisoned and the employees.

I remember a member of one of my churches wanting to leave his job, but couldn't, because his wife was being treated for breast cancer, and their family wouldn't ever be able to get health insurance at a new job. Are these all versions of the master/slave oligarch/laborer relationship? It's as if the model keeps coming back, just in a different form. When people live within a certain model, they find it hard to imagine it differently.

I laughed when Mike opened his sermon last Sunday saying that he never talks to people on planes, because he doesn't want them to know he's a minister. At that very moment, Linda and I were on a 11:35am flight, talking with our seatmate. I'm sure that "lesbian" "minister" and "UCC" all came up, because we want people to know that not all Christian ministers are straight white men, and not all Christians are conservative!

Another place where we find ourselves sharing with people concerns our marriage. Some people try to fit our lesbian relationship into their own gendered understanding of marriage. They want to know, who does the man things? Who grills? Who does the finances? Who does the yard work? Who fixes things around the house? The idea that a couple could divide household tasks based on interest and skill, rather than gender alone, seems like a foreign idea to some. We all know plenty of heterosexual relationships in which the partners share and negotiate roles. But not all do. Sometimes changing the system seems too threatening.

How do we know if changing the system is the right thing to do? And how do we make the changes? The current existential threat to democracy is happening in the midst of our various 250th anniversary celebrations of a whole host of revolutionary events. I was in the Midwest when we celebrated the Bicentennial in the summer of 1976. Back then, or maybe being outside of New England, we focused on the Declaration of Independence and were done with it.

This time around, we're recognizing many 250th anniversaries. This past February, my folk

singing group sang a concert of revolutionary hymns in recognition of the 250th anniversary of Leslie's Retreat in Salem, when the local townspeople fended off the British soldiers. In April, Heather Cox Richardson spoke at the 250th anniversary of the lighting of the lanterns in Old North Church, and Lexington and Concord held their grand reenactments. This June 14th commemorates not the 250th, but the 248th anniversary of the adoption of our first American flag. And the semiquincentennial of the ratification of our Constitution won't happen until 2039. That is, as Ben Franklin would say, "if we can keep it." Revolution takes time.

Back to the revolution among the early Christians. I find it really interesting that in both cases, the prisons can't keep their prisoners. In Jerusalem, it was an Angel of the Lord who opened the doors. In Philippi, an earthquake in the middle of the night breaks open the jail doors and loosens the chains. In both cases, the prisoners didn't run. The guard was ready to kill himself – presumably because his bosses would have done so when they discovered the jailbreak. The compassion that the apostles and Paul and Silas have for the prison guard is lifechanging. They see the guard as a victim of the system, and the guard makes the life-changing decision to leave, a decision that affects his work, and the support of his whole household. The story in Acts is not called "Paul Casts Out a Demon" or "Paul Heals a Slave Girl" or "The Earthquake" – it is "A Jailer's Conversion." Because that's what it's really about.

And then listen to the next verses 35-40, which we didn't read earlier, and which have a stunning poignance for us these days:

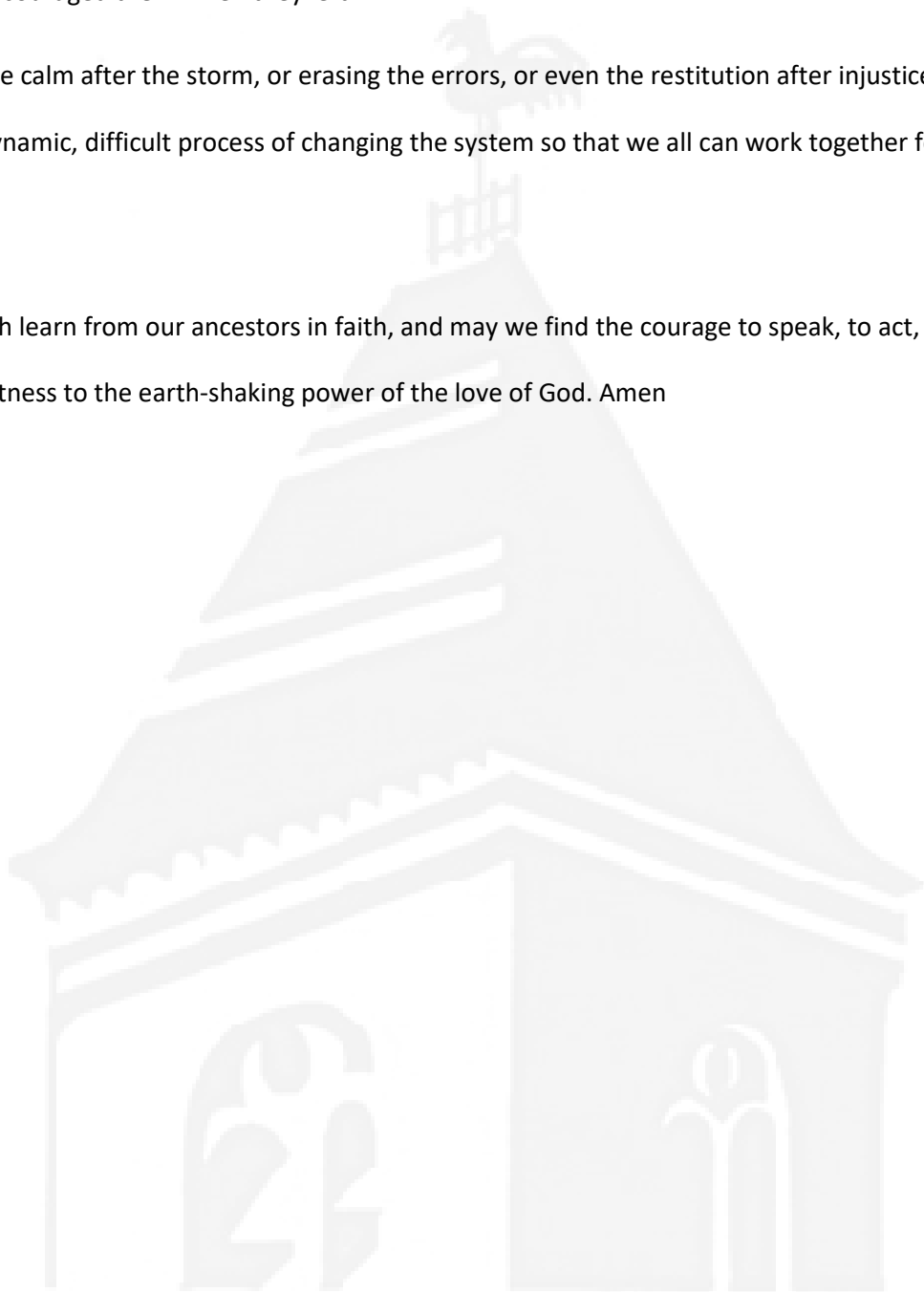
When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in Peace." But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.<sup>1</sup>

Peace is not the calm after the storm, or erasing the errors, or even the restitution after injustice.

Peace is the dynamic, difficult process of changing the system so that we all can work together for the good of all.

May our church learn from our ancestors in faith, and may we find the courage to speak, to act, and to bear witness to the earth-shaking power of the love of God. Amen



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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:35-40