

The Cost of Freedom
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
Acts 16: 16-25



*Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. **17** She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." **18** She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. **19** When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. **20** They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar **21** by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice." **22** The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. **23** After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. **24** When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. **25** About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.*

When I was growing up in Springfield, MA, my mother used to call me home for supper with a cow bell. We lived on the second floor of a two

family home and she would stand on the back porch and ring and ring and ring/clang and clang and clang that dinner bell. She had taken to the dinner bell after I failed to respond to her voice calling across the neighborhood. It was kind of like the Anthonnnny! Thing from the old Prince spaghetti commercials. In fact, it got so bad with my lack of response to her voice, that my mother used to complain that I needed a hearing aid. She complained so much, that when I saw an ad in her *Ladies Home Journal* magazine for BelTone hearing aids (no salesman will come calling!) I filled out the form for my free at-home assessment. But the cowbell worked pretty well, and so I was surprised one afternoon, while playing street hockey out in front of my house, that a car bearing a BelTone logo pulled up to the curb on our street. The man got out and went to our door. I figured he was there for my grandfather...until my mother rang the bell well before dinner and I was summoned to explain to the nice BelTone salesman (who wasn't supposed to show up) that I had written for the free home assessment that I assumed would come in the mail. Now that I think of it, I'm not sure how that would have worked. I do remember, however, how red my mother's face was as she presented me to the not too happy salesman!

I tell you this story because it's Mother's Day and because what I really want to share is my experience of Jesus. It's similar to Matthew, Mark, and Luke's in that I have a relationship with Jesus. We have been through a lot together over the years: dealing with the angry salesman, dealing with an angry mom, falling in love with Martha, raising children, working, playing, figuring out how to navigate tough situations, and grieving. Jesus has been a constant in my life and I like to think that I always understand what he has

in mind for me, but the truth is, as time unfolds, I have come to realize that I usually only capture a bit of what he's said; I only understand part of his wisdom, and I wish he carried a cowbell so that I'd get the whole lesson in one fell swoop. Instead, I usually respond to the part of Jesus' counsel that I like the best. The one that serves my beliefs and values and general direction. While that often works out, sometimes I discover later on that the thing I thought I knew was not what Jesus actually said. I learn from my studies that I've made a mistake.

For example in today's text, Luke tells the story of Paul, acting in Jesus' spirit, exorcising a young woman who is believed to be possessed by a profane spirit. *Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."* When I read this I believed that the woman must be delusional or mentally ill. Her persistence and lack of boundaries pointed me in that direction of understanding. In my studies, I found that the *Most High God* that she refers to is actually Zeus! She is a disciple of the Greek god and proclaims that *he* is actually the one that Paul is declaring. She is trying to correct Paul and his friends of their (from her perspective) folly. She is working on the understanding that *she* has of holiness. She is predicting the future and earning money for her owners by fortune-telling from this perspective.

Now, what happens next in the Book of Acts is probably not exactly what happened in the moment. In my research on Paul's eventual response to the woman, I found that it follows the typical "exorcism narrative" that exists

in the gospel of Mark and Luke (who also wrote Acts). In those gospels Jesus does the exorcising of spirit and in those gospels he is atypically abrupt. The Anchor Bible Commentary translates his words to the spirit as, “SHUT UP!” In each case, Jesus becomes annoyed and just turns on the spirit without first seeking a relationship with the one who is supposedly possessed. And here, Paul *became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!”* He tells her to “SHUT UP AND GET OUT!” in Jesus’ name. Which makes sense as a story from Luke...but less sense as a story from Jesus.

In my research, it turns out that none of the exorcisms where Jesus just hauls off on the afflicted are believed to be authentic. At least the words attributed to Jesus aren’t authentic. They are fabrications or understandings of the authors. They are inconsistent with Jesus’ language and communication type.

And so we have to start wondering what Jesus did say in those cases. And we have to wonder what Paul might have actually said on that occasion. Fortunately, we have the cowbell of Jesus healing others before and after the exorcisms. We have accounts of people bringing their sick to him for care. We have stories of Jesus talking with the afflicted, hearing about their struggle and hurt, and THEN taking action to bring peace and healing to those who were ill. We have stories of Jesus asking people if they want to be healed...and waiting until they answer before doing anything...or sometimes just proclaiming that in their desire to be healed, they are whole!

Jesus leaves room for lots of different ways in which people can become whole.

My experience of Jesus is that he leaves the details of the healing to God. Jesus facilitates the Good News of God's care for the person who is unwell. Who is out of sorts. Who is dis-eased. He does not demand that the person take a particular action, but he invites the person into a particular relationship. There is a freedom in Jesus' invitation. He respects us to decide when and how we will find wholeness within our relationship with the Holy. He loves us however we choose and supports *us* in our decisions...he supports US however things turn out! Sometimes he places a hand on our shoulder. Sometimes he wipes away a tear. Sometimes he lets us go for a bit. He waits until we are ready to be with him again.

Unlike the men who enslaved the woman for her beliefs; unlike the religious leaders who condemned Jesus for proclaiming a different version of God's love than they understood; unlike the government that imprisoned Paul and Silas for teaching what they believed was false and antiestablishment; Jesus sets us free. Free to do good. Free to make mistakes. Free to misunderstand. Free to change our minds. Free to be a little closer to wholly human. Jesus rings the cowbell of compassion that calls us to a table of grace...a relationship that is unearned and yet, so ever presently sweet.

That grace comes at a price. It costs us our self-assured swagger. It costs us demanding particular beliefs or behaviors. It costs us asserting ownership of another person. It costs us to expect perfection in an imperfect world where 12-year-old boys fill out forms in the back of Ladies

Home Journal magazines and drive their mother to derision. It costs us playing God.

I wish that Mark and Luke had more accurately portrayed Jesus' encounters with the people who were afflicted with "spirits." Given what I've learned about our Lord I imagine the conversation would have been more of an open door to a new life instead of the acerbic encounters that seems to guide us now. I imagine Jesus would have taken time to listen to the situation the individual was experiencing. I imagine Jesus would have rung a bell to welcome that person home...at any cost. Amen.