



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Acts 16: 16-34, John 17: 20-26

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7th Sunday of Easter

“Shaking the Foundations”

Money does strange things to human beings, does it not? It's the default god of modern culture. As a god, it promises and delivers immediate results. It gives to us exactly what we believe we want, when we want it. What more could we ask of a god? The more devotion we direct its way, the more it delivers – big house, cars, luxury, the easy life. All it asks is that we make a few minor sacrifices here and there – time with our children, peace of mind, a walk through the forest, time for friends. But, it whispers seductively to us – give me devotion *now* and there will be lots of time in the future. What's important, it reminds us, is to have lots of it, because it's the secret to freedom. More devotion and I'll make you free, it tells us. But a strange thing happens on the way to the future. We find ourselves solemnly placing our values, our humanity, and our integrity at its altar. And instead of having more freedom, we become its slave.

Take the men in the story from Acts this morning. They found a way to make money – own a human being. If the slave has psychic abilities all the better. She becomes a cash cow to them – a great investment. One day, the slave girl spots Paul. She knows another slave when she sees one – she pesters Paul with the truth declaring ad nauseum: “These men are slaves of the

Most High God”. Perhaps there was a subtle slight intended. Whereas she was a slave of low-life profiteers, *they* served the Most High God. Whereas they were slaves of the fast buck, these men served another God. In any case, Paul's had enough. He casts out the spirit of divinization, not because there's anything inherently wrong with psychic powers. It's more that if this is the “thing” that the men want from her, removing it may just be the key to her freedom. Without these powers, she's of no use to the men.

God help the man who threatens the cash flow. They have Paul arrested. For what? For “disturbing our city, and advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe”. (Acts 16:20-21) Trumped up charges. Paul and his followers are thrown in jail, and “severely” flogged, for their liberating gesture on behalf of the Most High God. You see, there are two earthquakes in this morning's reading: the geological one that shook the walls of the prison, flung wide the doors, and loosed the chains of the prisoners. But before that there is also a spiritual quake - Paul's “disturbance” shakes the very foundations of the Roman Empire. His seemingly innocent gesture struck at the very heart of Roman culture and ours. He undermines the sovereignty of money.

In effect, his exorcism signals that their god – money – is meant to serve a greater good, a higher God.

Some things never change. We don't enslave humans in the Western World, thank goodness. But we turn everything, the planet, her creatures, human beings, and even *ourselves* into commodities toward the end of making money. Did you catch the recent study indicating that 1/3 of us think of ourselves as workaholics? From an early age we're initiated into the culture of money by thinking about ourselves as "human resources." Increasingly, the point of education has become prepare us to serve the economy, not fall in love with learning as an end in itself. Education is becoming a means to an economic end – not an end in itself.

And still today, those who try to speak a liberating word on behalf of a higher God – to put justice first, to suggest it's time to organize our economy around a healthy planet, or to suggest that we support our artists – is met with disdain and called a kook. Said person will be tolerated right up to the point of where it threatens to disturb the cash flow – and there the conversation ends. So, we can talk about saving the spotted owls, if it doesn't involve preserving their habitat, which affects the bottom-line. We can talk about bringing down the temperature of the planet, as long as it doesn't involve cutting into profits of the oil companies, which, by the way, I benefit from as much as the next guy. We can talk about pursuing our dreams, so long as it doesn't impact

our pensions. We can talk about following Christ, as long as it doesn't interrupt the cash flow. This is the "custom" Paul transgressed.

There he is - in chains, locked behind steel bars, his back striped and bleeding. But notice - he's singing up a storm to the Liberating God of Jesus Christ! The paradoxes abound in this story. Despite being in chains, he's as free as a bird. He's in the darkest part of the jail, the inner most cell, yet he's infused with an inner light that even the deep cuts in his back cannot extinguish. When the earthquake hits, they just keep singing their hymns. He doesn't have to escape from the jail to be free. He's already free in Christ.

"What must I do to be saved?, the jailer asks. He wants whatever Paul has – and so do we. We want to be free to know and serve the Most High God – free from whatever binds us.

Our freedom paradoxically is found in yoking ourselves to Spirit. As we "consent to the presence of God" we find what we're looking for - that which money promised to deliver but was powerless to effect. We discover our deepest self – the one in union with God, with Christ, and with the cosmos. In John's gospel, Jesus longs for us to find this holy unity.

"May they all be one", he prays, "As you Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us" (John 17:21). Not until we realize this mutual in-dwelling, will we discover our freedom from other gods. And we don't have to do anything special to

attain this holy identity – just consent to it. Let yourself *be* in God. Let Christ *be* in you. Let yourself *be* in Christ. That's where you are anyway. You just forgot. Me too. To get even an inkling of this is to experience an earthquake. This is why Paul didn't get up and try to run away when the earthquake hit. He just knew he was in God – whether he was behind bars or not, whether he was being flogged or not, he was in God; whether he was hungry or in need, he was in God; whether you were a Jew or a Gentile, male or female, slave or free, you were in God and God was in you. Where can I go from your presence, asks the Psalmist; whither can I flee. If ascend to the heavens you are there, if I descend to Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and fly to utmost parts of the sea, even there you are with me (Psalm 139).

To realize this mutual indwelling, of God in all and all in God is to fall back in love with the world, with other people, and with your deepest self – because to be in God is to be in love. It is to see a slave girl being exploited and to want with all your heart to liberate her. It is to look out upon a world that is serving money and feel compassion at what it is we are missing in our misguided allegiance. It is to love even those who put you in jail because they are imprisoned by a false belief, and you know it. It is to ask the question: If I wasn't all twisted up inside by the 1000 faces of fear, who would I be and what would I be giving my life to? To dwell in this holy mutual abiding love is to find the freedom that your soul knows

is your birthright – your freedom to create a life that flows from love, and to offer the love that comes as pure gift back to the Most High God.

For 2000 years, followers of Christ have gathered around a table, remembered his life and death and resurrection – and in so doing have felt the living presence of Christ abiding in them. As you receive this bread and this cup, you may release into this presence. It is possible this morning to consent to this holy presence – and experience the foundations of our lives shaken by a love that sets us free.