

Acts 16:16-40
Act 12:1-19
August 15, 2010

Jail Birds

Vince Everett found himself in prison for accidentally killing a man. While he was incarcerated he learned to play the guitar from a burned out old country singer named Hunk Houghton. Everett really takes to music and when he gets out of prison he starts to write and record songs and he becomes a star. So goes the plot of the movie Jailhouse Rock. Perhaps you have seen this scene from the Movie.....

Show Clip of Jailhouse Rock

One of the controversial aspects of the film which debuted in 1957 was that an ex-con could make something of his life. People critiqued the movie because they didn't think Jailbirds could change. Those hips moving around were also suspect.

Maybe Elvis and his producers got this idea about singing in prison from the Apostle Paul and his partner, Silas. Even at midnight Paul and Silas find themselves singing hymns and praying about their captivity. Suddenly their Jailhouse is rocked. Luke who writes the book of Acts, says it was an earthquake so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. The story from Acts is wilder than a Hollywood movie.

Slavery, Demons, exorcisms, earthquakes, conversions and rescues; the power of God's love, rocks the city of Phillipi.

Things are no different for the Apostle Peter closest confidant of Jesus. An Angel of the Lord comes to him while he is imprisoned in Jerusalem and the chains fell right off his wrists. From the presence of two sleeping guards Peter is stealthily escorted to safety in the darkness of the night.

There are several stories In Book of Acts about the imprisonment and release of early church leaders. Yes Paul and Silas and Peter were imprisoned for teaching the world about Jesus. Yes by God's grace they were freed to be able to continue their work; but there are deeper messages here. These stories are written on several levels. Luke infuses the experiences of these early church leaders with a great sense of spiritual reflection. How are we freed from the things that imprison us? We are freed by the Angel or Spirit of God. We are freed by prayer and singing. We are freed by the power of the grace of God

The evil power of slavery mars the beginning of our tale from Phillipi. A slave girl, powerless and nameless, was used by men for monetary gain because according to Luke she had a spirit of divination. She could read people real well. In today's parlance she had high EQ, a real sharp

extrovert. She could size you up in a minute. She could read people so well that when Paul and Silas walked by each day she would cry out “These men are slaves of the Most High God.” This woman imprisoned by men in slavery could see the freedom of slavery to God. There was something about Paul and Silas that radiated health, wholeness and grace.

Luke uses the language of demons and spirits when he describes the healing that Paul brings to the woman. Paul very much annoyed by her ranting and raving orders the spirit that imprisons her to come out. He shifts her spirit and perspective and suddenly she is of no financial value to her slave holders. These men who imprison a woman are themselves imprisoned and addicted to the stream of income she has been providing them and they are hot. Power does not welcome challenge. They have Paul and Silas arrested.

The whole notion of spirits and demons is quite a distance from our way of thinking. Even though I don't believe in demons, I am aware that there are demonic powers loose upon our planet. There are mindsets and cultures that are twisted and violent. We don't refer to fascism, communism, Apartheid, racism and terrorism as demons, we don't refer to greed, unbridled power, ostentation and abuse as spirits yet we clearly understand these institutions and values as evil, oppressive, and

dangerous; hence demonic. We know these evils as structures and systems that captivate or imprison us or our neighbors. The Theologian Walter Wink points out that the Bible insists that Powers and Principalities are both physical and spiritual. “In the Biblical view the powers are one and the same time visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional....The powers are simultaneously an outer visible structure and an inner spiritual reality.”¹ We know there are not demons but there is a spiritual aspect to forces we encounter – forces like sexual abuse, racism and apartheid.

“Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of the Pentagon or the Chrysler Corporation, or the Mafia [or the Mexican Drug Cartels] as having a spirituality, but they do.”² Most of us have heard at our workplaces the importance of maintaining the corporate culture³ or the office culture. It’s the culture that is the spiritual. The culture of Nazism had hate of Jews and non-Aryans at its center. The culture of Apartheid had hate of black Africans at its center. Wink says that every institution, be it the family, a congregation, a corporation, an office, a government or a football team has a spiritual reality joined with its physical reality. When an institution

¹ Walter Wink, *The Powers that be* page 16, Galilee press NY, 1998

² *ibid.* p24

³ *Ibid* Wink refers to Terrence Deal on Corporate Cultures page 29

pursues a vocation other than the one for which God created it and ruthlessly makes its own interest the highest good, then that power becomes demonic and people are imprisoned. Evil is not just personal but structural and spiritual. Demon – the word demon - was the best way people of the first century knew how to describe it.

I recently Watched the Film Invictus. Its is the story of Nelson Mandela who became President of South Africa in 1994 and his ingenious and creative efforts to bring unity to his country after many years of Apartheid. Apartheid was an oppressive system of racial segregation imposed and enforced by the National Party government in South Africa between 1948 and 1994. Under Apartheid, the rights of the majority non-white inhabitants of South Africa were curtailed and minority rule by white people was sustained. Apartheid was demonic and brutal and Mandela fought it through the militant wing of the African National Congress. In 1962 Mandela was arrested and convicted of sabotage. After some brutal massacres of Black South Africans, Mandela for a period of time forsake his earlier commitment to non violence. In his younger days he considered Mahatma Ghandi a mentor. Mandela spent 27 years in Prison for his crimes – 9000 days. You would think that after such a long time in prison Mandela would be bitter; but Bishop Desmond Tutu said that while in prison

Mandela was transformed. Mandela was and is a Christian and he allowed his heart to be changed by God.

This scene from the movie is from Day one at the South African equivalent of the White House after Mandela has been sworn in as President.....(It very close to the beginning of the movie)

Mandela had a vision for South Africa. He wanted people of all races and all mixes of races to work together to make a great nation. As far as he was concerned it started with him.

Invictus is the name of a short poem by William Ernest Henley for which the film is named. This Poem is said to have been be an inspiration for Mandela while he was in Prison.

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be,
For my unconquerable soul.*

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

*Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.*

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul*

The movie is to a significant extent about Mandela's support of the South African Rugby Team. Rugby was the white Afrikaner Sport and most black and mixed race South Africans hated Rugby for that reason. But Mandela reached out to the captain of the national rugby team and inspired him. That inspiration led to South African victory in the Rugby World Cup. You gotta watch the conclusion of the movie.

Mandela was a sinner and a saint like the rest of us. So many of us imprisoned by our opinion, our world view, our perspective on a personal, a family or work situation expect others to change first. We expect them to change, to accommodate us. Mandela made many bold and righteous decisions. He made mistakes. What I like about the movie is that it made clear that he believed change began with him. He was willing to forgive. He was willing to risk change so that others would change.

Paul and Silas prayed in prison, Paul and Silas sang hymns. While they were in prison they stayed open to God and God's grace. Where is it in our lives that we are held captive by our narrow perspectives, our side of the story, our ruts, our addictions, our assumptions? Where is it in our lives

that we are strongly, blindly even blindly clinging to our narrow perspective? When are we slaves to our family, or our corporate or even our American or Presbyterian or Christian culture, we are in need of hymns and prayers. The only way to get out of jail is to let God in.

There is an earthquake in Philippi, The jailer wakes, and when he sees that the doors are opened he is horrified. Knowing what happens to Jailers who permit their prisoners to escape he draws his sword and prepares to do the honorable thing. He just wants to die. He is imprisoned by his perspective.

Paul shouts, "don't do it." We're all here just singing some Jailhouse rock. The Jailer says but you were bound in chains, now you are free to escape. Paul says, No, we prisoners are free and you our jailer, were chained; but now you are free to escape. And the Jailer asks, what do I have to do to be saved? What do I need to do to be free? And he was baptized.

Jailers don't like to be rocked. But rock them we must.