

## GATHERING OURSELVES TOGETHER

Welcome

Prelude

\*Opening Hymn            *God of Grace and God of Glory* 669

## PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD

\*Call To Worship: (from rev-o-lution.org)

*Leader:     God made the heavens, the stars and the sky;*

*People:     May all creation praise our God!*

*Leader:     God made the plants and animals, birds and sea creatures;*

*People:     May all creation praise our God!*

*Leader:     God made us with purpose: to worship and care for what God made;*

*People:     May all creation praise our God!*

***Unison:    God calls the earth and all that is in it to worship and praise;  
              May all creation praise our God!***

\*Prayer for Forgiveness & Reconciliation (by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. found at <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/road-peace/prayers-martin-luther-king-jr>. Accessed 04/19/18)

*God, we thank you for the inspiration of Jesus. Grant that we will love you with all our hearts, souls, and minds, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves, even our enemy neighbors. And we ask you, God, in these days of emotional tension, when the problems of the world are gigantic in extent and chaotic in detail, to be with us in our going out and our coming in, in our rising up and in our lying down, in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, until the day when there shall be no sunset and no dawn. Amen.*

\*Moment of Silence

\*Assurance of Forgiveness

\*Passing of the Peace

**The Lord Be With You**

*And Also With You*

\*Gloria Patri

Announcements

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## SHARING AND PRAYING TO THE LORD

Offertory

\*Doxology & Prayer of Dedication

\*Hymn *Now I Belong to Jesus* 503

Sharing our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer & Response

### **PASTORAL PRAYER:**

May we hang our heads in prayer for little boys who are given live ammunition and forced to fight wars that someone else started.

for little girls who are dressed up and painted up as women of pleasure.

for children who work their way through childhood without play.

(Silence)

May we hang our heads in prayer For released ex-offenders with no safe place to go -- not even the local church.

For every person who suffers in silence with an addiction, or an HIV diagnosis, or a heart-wounding secret that can never be told.

(Silence)

Lord, have mercy, upon the exploited and suffering peoples of the world

Lord, have mercy, upon all who have lost hope

Forgive us, Lord, for turning our heads and pretending not to notice

Forgive us, Lord, for the complicity of silence

Forgive us, Lord, for neglecting to disturb the city on behalf of children in harm's way.

We pray on this day for:

HEALTH	JOYS	OTHER
	Birthdays --  Anniversaries --  -- Safe travel	Those who have died:  Servicemen/women  Churches  Perry Family
<p><b><u>MOMENT OF SILENCE</u></b></p> <p>Hear our prayers, O Lord, and may all glory be to you in the name of Christ Jesus, he who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, both now and forevermore.</p> <p>We pray as Jesus taught us:  <b>OUR FATHER...</b></p> <p><b>The Lord's Prayer</b></p>		

Moment of Music

GOD'S WORD TO US

Reading from:

*Acts 16:16-34*

Sermon:

*"Becoming Good News with... The Exploited: Paul and Silas"*

In Galatians 5, Paul writes:

*<sup>1</sup>For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

This is quite a thing to say. Throughout Paul's letters there are these little hints that there is a fundamental problem with the buying and selling of human beings. There is a serious problem with enslaving our spiritual sensibilities to ways of being that yoke us to destructive and dehumanizing ways of the world. Freedom in Christ means we seek ways to free people in the world and ways to free ourselves from those systems, ideas, and practices that allow others to enslave people.

Today, we meet a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit of divination. The slave girl can tell the future and her owners make money off her. The girl is vulnerable, and her owners are benefiting from her vulnerability. She is exploited in her person for the economic gain of her owners.

This is a relationship of exploitation. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines exploitation in this way:

*To exploit someone is to take unfair advantage of them. It is to use another person's vulnerability for one's own benefit...*

*Exploitation can be transactional or structural. In the former case, the unfairness is a property of a discrete transaction between two or more individuals. A sweatshop that pays low wages, for example, or a pharmaceutical research firm that tests drugs on poor subjects in the developing world, might be said to exploit others in this sense. But exploitation can also be structural—a property of institutions or systems in which the “rules of the game” unfairly benefit one group of people to the detriment of another.*

[\(https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/exploitation/\)](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/exploitation/)

Paul, “*in great annoyance*”, casts out the spirit of fortune-telling in the girl, freeing her from possession and exploitation at the same time. The girl's owners are horrified that their money train is now gone.

Look at what the owners do. Rather than telling the authorities,

*“These men have ruined the way we make money”, they tell the authorities,*

*“These men are ruining the customs of the city and are preaching revolutionary ideas.”*

Why would the owners of the girl do this? Is it because taking advantage of people, owning people, exploiting them to do our work, is shameful in any day and age? I don't know, but it seems strange to me that this is the argument the girl's owners use. Of course, Paul and Silas are also ruining the customs and ideas of the age.

Freeing slaves from being possessed by spirits or other human beings is disruptive whether it happens in ancient Philippi or in America in the early 1800s or today in a brothel in a suburb of Boston.

In 2016, the United Nations - International Labor Organization estimated that 40 million people worldwide were living in a forced labor or forced marriage situation. This number is likely very low, since modern day slavery is well-hidden and well-financed by cartels and shady groups worldwide.<sup>1</sup>

Those numbers are staggering and horrifying. That we still have slavery in the modern world should disturb and afflict you. Even when slavery is outlawed, the impact and the attitudes that allowed for it can persist for generations. The financial hit can last for decades and decades. In Paul and Silas' day, there were places where as much as 40% of the population existed in some sort of exploitative relationship.

In the slave girl, we see the exploitation of persons. But there is also the exploitation of work. Our jailer today was probably in an exploitative work situation.

What does it say about someone's work situation that, if something happens and they fail at their job, the best alternative is suicide? The culture of Philippi was Roman, and that culture was built on a shame and honor foundation. Our jailer was a lowly agent of the Empire, who lived in the same complex as the jail. His meaning is tied completely into his work, and his sense of self-worth is dependent on success at that job. Furthermore, this was a warrior culture.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/19/world/global-slavery-estimates-ilo/index.html>

Failure means death, and when a failure on the job means death, I think we can safely assume this is a relationship of exploitation.

In the face of failure, though, Paul and Silas do everything in their power to help the jailer save face. Paul has convinced the other prisoners to stay in place after the earthquake has snapped open the doors. The jailer will not lose his livelihood, nor will he and his family suffer the death sentence of failure in a low-level job serving the empire.

This is quite a gift the jailer has been given, and he knows it. The jailer also knows something is different about Paul and Silas, so the jailer, who now has a direct experience of earthly salvation, asks for the eternal salvation Paul and Silas seem to have. The freedom in Christ Paul and Silas shared in their prayers and hymns in the jail are attractive to the jailer, and so he is baptized into the faith along with his whole family.

In gratitude, the jailer tends to the wounds of Paul and Silas. Freedom in Christ means relationships built on tending to and receiving care from one another, rather than transactions and exchanges.

Just like last week, when we saw that the drama of the story could so easily draw us away from the point of the story, which was the light of God, so also this week, we can get distracted by demons and possession and the nuances of jailers in ancient Rome. The point here is exploitation and freedom from it.

The only point to the possession of the girl is that possession is the vehicle that allows her to be exploited by her owners. The only point about the situation of the jailer is that his work is the vehicle of how the economics and culture exploit him.

Paul and Silas disrupt both. But this disruption is not by revolution, or by active resistance. Instead, the apostles of Christ completely upend the way people behave towards slaves and jailers and prisons and laws and exchanges of money.

Exploitation is hard for Americans to talk about. We don't like to think about it. I believe part of the reason is that we raise up economic ideologies to the level of religious belief, and so for us, capitalism is a part of the Christian way.

To not be a capitalist is to not be Christian, and to be Christian is to be a capitalist.

It helps that capitalism as an economic idea was first explained by a Scottish Presbyterian – Adam Smith.

And it *doesn't* help that when industrialization expanded rapidly, so did the exploitation of peoples' work because of the way capitalism governs exchanges and values. And it helps even less when the backbone of capitalism in America came about because of the exploitation of persons as slaves. One good way to think of slavery is the off-loading of the wear and tear and injury and suffering of physical labor onto the bodies of others.

Now, just to be clear, before we go any further, way back in high school and college, I was a Marxist, a communist. I read the works and accepted the critique of capitalism. As I got older, though, I came to understand that capitalism is the best of poorly implemented economic ways of being. Now, in our present day and age, I think we are in the midst of a massive breakdown of all economic systems. At the same time, it is inarguable on many levels that no other system of economy has gotten more people out of poverty than capitalist economic systems.

My point here is that we must see through the civic religion of capitalism and understand that exploitation is categorically a denial of the Resurrected Christ, regardless of the economic system. Living in the freedom of Christ roots out exploitation and alters personal relationships into relationships of love, faith, and hope. Even when he is acting out of annoyance, and in the name of Christ, Paul frees someone. Even when they are in prison, because of their faith and because they upended an exploitative relationship, Paul and Silas are more concerned about the livelihood of another rather than their physical freedom from prison.

If you are having trouble visualizing a modern-day example of what Paul and Silas are up to, we need only look to a group of people who were inspired by this very story. When Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the protesters for civil rights were arrested in many places (I have in mind Selma, AL) they did exactly what Paul and Silas did – prayed and sang hymns. Rev. King inspired thousands of people to trust, first, in the spiritual freedom they already had, and then, secondly, inspired them to seek that freedom in their daily, earthly lives.

The jailer's spiritual freedom joined hands with the slave girl's earthly freedom with King and the civil rights protesters in those streets throughout the mid-1960s.

Paul and Silas can only do what they do because they are anchored, tethered, to something more solid than the economy of the day, something more secure than the doors of a prison, something more meaningful than the swirling exploitations of people and work. Only with a rigorous, passionate, profound confidence in the freedom they have in Jesus Christ can they do what they do. Resilience, the ability to get up from the floor and do what needs to be done, depends on strong anchors in God and Christ. The slave girl, in her possession, knows this. That is why she says, *"These men are slaves of the most high God..."*

When we become Good News, we anchor people to Christ. The Good News may or may not become a disruption to the customs, the economy, the ways of the world we live in. But there is a high likelihood that, just by living into the freedom we have been given through the Cross and the Resurrection, we are going to get a few people upset. When this happens, we are becoming Good News with Paul and Silas. We are disrupting relationships built on exploitation and creating relationships built on love, hope, and faith.

I want to end with a reading I used for our Council meeting on Wednesday evening. It is from Edgar Whitaker Work. He was a Presbyterian pastor in Ohio. He wrote many books and this is from a devotional he wrote called *"Every Day..."* In it, he references the story of Paul's trip on a ship from Adramyttium and the storm he and the crew ran into, which pushed them far off course. At night, they were coming upon land and the crew begins to panic because they are afraid they are going to run aground and die. Paul convinces the crew to stay on the boat and prays with them. Here is what Rev. Work says about that:

*They let go four anchors from the stern, and prayed for the day." Acts 27:29.*

*OFTEN there is nothing else to do but to cast out our anchors and wait quietly for the dawn. Blessed be God there is no night so dark and no storm so heavy as to deprive us of the use of our anchors.*



*Danger may be on all sides, but meantime, if we let down the anchors, we can hold fast.*

*The apostle Paul tells us in one place what three of life's anchors are. They are faith, hope and love, and it is significant that he says that they abide.*

*Faith is a mighty anchor, yet easily handled withal (as well). One who has let go this anchor can breast the storm and say, "My heart is fixed."*

*Hope also is a mighty anchor. There are times indeed when this anchor holds after faith has given way. Then indeed "we are saved by hope."*

*But it is easy to see why the apostle calls love "the greatest of these." When the pull on faith's anchor has become too great, and when even hope's anchor is ready to loosen, the anchor of love often holds fast, bearing all the extra strain until the storm breaks and the day dawns.*

*And what of the fourth anchor? The answer is in the margin, which reads "they prayed for the day."*

Let us anchor ourselves to the faith, hope, and love that Christ has for us, and let us be freed by that yoke we are asked to carry. Disrupt the exploitation of people and the work they do wherever you see it with the same love, hope, and faith that Paul and Silas show today. Let us become Good News like Paul and Silas and let our freedom become the freedom of all who are near us.

Amen

## ENTERING THE WORLD

\*Closing Hymn

*All Shall Be Well* 236

\*Benediction

Musical Postlude