

“A Miraculous Imagination”

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1. Prayer and Introduction
 - a. “May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, our rock and redeemer.” Amen. (Psalm 19:14)
 - b. Sermon title, A Miraculous Imagination
2. Paul – last week’s sermon, really quick!
 - a. Last sermon series before Summer – learning about Paul
 - b. The readings from last week, conversion of Saul, the Christian Persecutor, to Paul, the Christian
 - i. Most likely didn’t change his name, as much as his Jewish name was Saul, and his Latin name was Paul, and he preferred to go by Paul.
 - c. Struck blind, regained his vision
 - d. Both a Jew and a Roman citizen
 - i. Was a Pharisee
 - e. His side gig was tent making – a way he supported himself while doing his ministry
 - i. Often used to describe bivocational pastor’s other vocation
3. Paul as a kinda-apostle in the book of Acts
 - a. I’ve not traditionally been a fan of Paul
 - b. Seemed a bit full of himself, and he wasn’t even one of Jesus’ direct disciples. He never met the guy in person!
 - c. Refers to himself as a capitol A Apostle, but the book of Acts does not, describes him as a witness.
 - i. Why should he have such a pre-eminent place in the New Testament?
 - ii. Half the letters (13) of the NT have been attributed to him
 - d. Paul is slowly being redeemed in my eyes
 - i. Most scholars think he only wrote 7 letters, the others being written by others in his name or misattribution
 1. Some of my biases against Paul came from those other letters
 - ii. Today’s reading is redeeming Paul in my eyes.
 - iii. He isn’t one of the direct disciples – he’s one of the first who has “not seen, but has believed” as mentioned at the end of the Gospel of John
 - iv. And for a twist in the story, which we will get to shortly
4. Paul, thrown in jail
 - a. Fortuneteller prophesying for Paul
 - b. Paul got annoyed, cast the spirit out
 - c. Through political trickery, was thrown in jail without trial by owners of the slave women, because they lost that income
 - i. But claimed they were “unRoman”
 - ii. Sound familiar?
5. Paul Acts in Prison
 - a. Different from other Apostle’s imprisonments in Acts
 - i. Acts 5 – all the Apostles, where an angel opened the prison doors at night and let them out

- ii. Acts 12 – an Angel leads Peter out, causing his chains to fall off and that he was sleeping between to guards
 - b. Paul and Silas were really secured
 - i. Feet in stocks, innermost jail cell
 - c. Earthquake!
 - i. No jail break!
 - 1. Not even the other prisoners!
 - ii. Jailer was ready to commit suicide
 - d. Paul assures jailer, baptized him and his family, and they enjoyed a meal together
 - i. Jailer brought them to his house, bound their wounds!
 - e. Post script, v. 35-40
 - i. Paul refused to leave prison to protest unjust behavior
 - ii. Used his privilege as a Roman citizen, to insist on better behavior
 - 1. Presumably coverages for other Christians at Philippi – Roman benefactor
- 6. True miracle is a Miraculous Imagination of Paul
 - a. Not merely self-serving behavior – me above everyone else
 - i. Loving thy neighbor, including enemy, the jailor
 - ii. Not ignoring his privileges as a Roman citizen, but using them for the benefit of others
 - b. Had the prophetic & apostolic imagination and grace to see fully where God was at work in this story.
 - i. Not just about freedom for Paul and Silas
 - ii. Chance to free others from other kinds of bondage
 - 1. Literal fear of death from the powers that be, enough to drive to suicide
 - 2. Powerful conversion – Christ with us \ Paul with jailor
 - 3. Holding authorities and crowd accountable for unjust actions
- 7. Paul and his use of privilege
 - a. Paul\Saul is able to spread Jesus’ message in ways the Jewish Apostles cannot, because of his dual citizenship and privileges.
 - b. While the authorities used their Roman status to silence and jail dissenters, Paul used it to call attention to their self-serving and unjustified behavior
 - i. Only one of Jesus’ followers with the status to do so
 - c. Even in jail and times of adversity, Paul is self-assured to look beyond his own needs and spreads the Good News, liberates others.
 - i. **“Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?”**
 - ii. **31 They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved— you and your entire household.”**
 - d. Stayed in jail after he was “freed”
 - i. This also is turning the other cheek, insisting on being treated with dignity
 - e. Imagine what could happen if the powerful in our society stood up for the lessor
 - i. Not a new idea - *Lysistrata* is a comedy by Aristophanes. Originally performed in classical Athens in 411 BC, it is a comic account of a woman's extraordinary mission to end the Peloponnesian War by denying all the men of the land any sex, which was the only thing they truly and deeply desired
 - ii. Pink hats going to black lives matter rallies or water rallies

1. Police maceing 70 year old white grandmothers? The country would never stand for it.
- f. this is the charge to the Christian church, to be like Paul and Silas in this story.
 - i. Not just focused on one's own survival, but focused on spreading Jesus' Gospel message, which is intended to LITERALLY save people's lives.
 - ii. And to have the miraculous imagination that these types of events can happen again
8. Paul's application of privilege and miraculous imagination today – one global, one local
9. Earth day
 - a. At their root, most environmental problems we struggle with today come from a lack of awareness or a lack of caring about how the various parts of nature interact and affect humans and the world
 - b. We, as Americans, on average, live with an inflated sense of personal worth and bias
 - i. BBC article in 2015 says it would take 3.9 earths to support the world's population at American levels of consumption.
 - ii. Currently, the world is using 1.5 earths worth of resources, exhausting our reserves
 - c. Miraculous imagination – imagining that we can do anything about this at all
 - i. Previous successes – hole in ozone layer, bringing species back from near extinction, rehabilitation of the forests of new England after centuries of exploitation and deforestation
 - d. Keeping in mind who and what we care about
 - i. Not just ourselves, but our future generations.
 - ii. Our neighbors
 - iii. Called as Stewards of God's creation
 - e. Remembering our greater connections
 - i. Not just you as individual, or as family units
 1. We as faith community – many churches environmental awareness, solar panels, embody and encourage better behavior
10. Miraculous Imagination for FCUCC
 - a. Right now, this church is at a pivotal time in deciding its future. And again, we need reminding what our ultimate focus should be
 - i. See ourselves as Paul and Silas, not as the jailor, or the crowd, or the authorities
 - b. Today's story about Paul is a good example for this church
 - i. Paul and Silas aren't the ones saved; they are the ones who save the jailor.
 - ii. In a bit of challenge, but not just focused on his own concerns
 - iii. Dreams bigger! Not just about survival, but converting enemies to friends, just as he was converted
 1. Uses his own experience as a template to help others
 - iv. Advocates for justice, even when it inconveniences him
 - c. What is it this church is wrestling with?
 - i. How you choose to talk about the problem already hints at your position
 - ii. If you see it primarily as a financial situation, it only addresses the financial aspect-
 1. and tend to think of solutions only in terms of cost cutting and fundraising

- iii. if you see the issue as an attendance issue, we tend to think in terms of getting more people to fill our pews, which for many would feel like being put in jail
- iv. If you see it primarily as a need to renew the focus and mission of the church, it encompasses a wider view
 - 1. And tend to think of solutions that are focused on going out of this building, spreading the good news, and showing people that church isn't a place that imprisons you, it frees you!
 - a. Talking with Lydia about her experience here the past year, didn't know a church like this existed.
- d. we Christians are called to be Paul and Silas – not defined by their position in life, but aware of their calling in the world and willing to use all the gifts, privileges, and struggles they have to help spread God's message and mission of freedom and liberation?
- e. Money isn't the solution.
 - i. Example of the dying church who received a large bequest
 - 1. Financial situation is secure, but it is a crypt, not a church
 - 2. No longer challenged by anything, because no longer seeing any need to connect with the community

11. Focus for the Month of May

- a. During the month of May, we will be devoting our Sunday worship time together to wrestle with these deep spiritual and fiscal questions
 - i. May 6, we will have a shorter worship service, then devote the extra time after the service to make sure that everyone understands the current financial and vision challenges of the church as it stands today
 - ii. Saturday May 19, the Michigan conference is offering a program at Pilgrim UCC in downtown Lansing
 - 1. Focused on the scripture Matthew 6:21 **“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”**
 - iii. May 20, on Pentecost Sunday, the day when we celebrate God sending the Holy Spirit onto the disciples
 - 1. Move from just money otherwise, it's a discussion of “what we can afford”, not imagining that we can be inspired to do more with what we have, and that new gifts are forthcoming
- b. Campbell Lovett – conference minister April
 - i. This church is at a crossroad – the cross road between engaging in renewal, or hunkering down

Readings

Acts 16:16-34

Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁶ One day, when we were on the way to the place for prayer, we met a slave woman. She had a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She made a lot of money for her owners through fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She began following Paul and us, shouting, “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!” ¹⁸ She did this for many days.

This annoyed Paul so much that he finally turned and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!” It left her at that very moment.

¹⁹ Her owners realized that their hope for making money was gone. They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the officials in the city center. ²⁰ When her owners approached the legal authorities, they said, “These people are causing uproar in our city. They are Jews ²¹ who promote customs that we Romans can’t accept or practice.” ²² The crowd joined in the attacks against Paul and Silas, so the authorities ordered that they be stripped of their clothes and beaten with a rod. ²³ When Paul and Silas had been severely beaten, the authorities threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to secure them with great care. ²⁴ When he received these instructions, he threw them into the innermost cell and secured their feet in stocks.

²⁵ Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison’s foundations. The doors flew open and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. ²⁸ But Paul shouted loudly, “Don’t harm yourself! We’re all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He led them outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your entire household.” ³² They spoke the Lord’s word to him and everyone else in his house. ³³ Right then, in the middle of the night, the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds. He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. ³⁴ He brought them into his home and gave them a meal. He was overjoyed because he and everyone in his household had come to believe in God.

³⁵ The next morning the legal authorities sent the police to the jailer with the order “Release those people.”

³⁶ So the jailer reported this to Paul, informing him, “The authorities sent word that you both are to be released. You can leave now. Go in peace.”

³⁷ Paul told the police, “Even though we are Roman citizens, they beat us publicly without first finding us guilty of a crime, and they threw us into prison. And now they want to send us away secretly? No way! They themselves will have to come and escort us out.” ³⁸ The police reported this to the legal authorities, who were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. ³⁹ They came and consoled Paul and Silas, escorting them out of prison and begging them to leave the city.

⁴⁰ Paul and Silas left the prison and made their way to Lydia’s house where they encouraged the brothers and sisters. Then they left Philippi.