

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Acts 16:16-34

One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there 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. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

SERMON

If you are wondering where all the new theologians are coming from, the answer is: Our Sunday Schools. Here is a sample of the new theology. "Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day, but a ball of fire by night." "The 6th commandment is, Thou shall not admit adultery." "The Golden Rule is to do unto others before they do unto you." "The Epistles are the wives of the Apostles." Finally, two insight regarding

marriage: "Paul preached Holy Acrimony, which is another name for marriage." "Christians have only one spouse, which is called Holy Monotony."

Do you enjoy reading travel/adventure stories? Evidently many Americans do. They buy travel books by the boatload and they read well-written travel stories. Recently six million people bought Liz Gilbert's "Eat, Pray, Love," which is soon to be released as a motion picture starring Julia Roberts. The book follows her travels to Italy, India and Indonesia, where she falls in love.

Eat. Pray. Love. The more I think about it, that wouldn't be a bad subtitle for the Book of Acts. In it Paul eats with new friends and prays constantly. Though it isn't romantic, there is plenty of love, God style. Acts is also a travel/adventure story. Starting in chapter 13 Paul travels with Barnabas, going from island to island, preaching to huge crowds and getting run out of town in Antioch of Pisidia. Actually he is run out of Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. By Jewish radicals. Maybe we ought to call this section, Eat, Pray, Run. In chapter 16, Paul and Barnabas split and Silas became Paul's partner. One of the places where they enjoyed success was in Philippi, where a woman by the name of Lydia offered the mission team her home both as their headquarters and a place where people could gather for worship, and listen to Paul teach. Women played a huge role in the development of the early church. It was only later that they were relegated to lesser status.

While in Philippi, it became the custom of Paul and Silas to go to a place of prayer on the days the community didn't gather. One day a slave girl, who was a psychic, began to follow them and to announce to people that the two of them were representatives of the most high God. The girl suffered from a form of mental illness, but had the unique and powerful gift of being able to predict the future. Those who "owned" her made a lot of money off the poor girl.

The girl's constant shouting irritated Paul, and one day he simply stopped and demanded the demon to come out. And it did. She immediately became healthy, but lost her gift of prediction. In all it was a good thing for her, but not for her owners. They were about to lose a lot of money. They roughed up Paul and Silas and then dragged them to the market square where they were arrested for disturbing the peace, and accused of being dangerous Jewish agitators subverting Roman law and order. This, of course, was as phony as a two and ½-dollar bill. They did none of these things, and to label them as Jewish troublemakers was pure racism. The judge declared them guilty, ordered a public beating and threw them into jail.

While in jail they were praying and singing when a sizeable earthquake took place, springing the doors, and

tearing apart the stocks that bound them. All the prisoners could have fled.

The jailer, knowing that he would be held accountable, was about to kill himself when Paul called out to him indicating he and Silas were still there. This led to the jailer to ask about the God that Paul and Silas worshiped, which led to the family of the jailer coming to faith.

There are so many things to learn from this story. Let's start with the slave girl. As I mentioned, she had a special gift. Perhaps she was kind of savant. (Do you remember Rain Man where the Dustin Hoffman character could do huge numbers in his head? Perhaps you've seen the mentally challenged young man on 60 minutes who can play any song after hearing it once. Perhaps the woman was like these men.) Paul healed her and set her free, though it infuriated her "owners." She had to lose something to be free.

Some gifts are like that. They are amazing, but they cost a person their life. That's the subject of a wonderful short novel by Mark Salzman called, *Lying Awake*. It is the story of a remarkable woman, Sister John of the Cross, a member of a Carmelite monastery outside Los Angeles. Fueled by her extraordinary visions, Sister John enjoyed a tremendous prayer life, which she described in her books. The books sold well and generated huge profits for the monastery. In addition, large numbers of people came to the monastery to participate in her workshops, and more than one young woman who read her books joined the order. If monasteries have such a thing as a super star, Sister John fits the bill.

Accompanying her marvelous visions are powerful headaches and minor seizures. When the seizures began to come more frequently, her superior, Mother Mary Joseph, directed Sister John to visit a neurologist.

When the doctor viewed the results of an EEG and a CT scan, he quickly determined that she had an epileptic disorder that was localized in the temporal-lobe area of the brain. The doctor saw this as good news, suggesting that this location meant that Sister John was prevented from having grand-mal attacks, the kind that spread across the brain and cause convulsions. He determined that she had a small meningioma just above her right ear, and told her it was easy to treat. Her prognosis for complete recovery was excellent.

Sister John's research revealed that other artists had suffered from the same disorder: Dostoevsky, Tennyson, Proust and perhaps Van Gogh. She also discovered that if she had the treatment it meant not just the end of headaches and seizures, but also the visions. Like Dostoevsky, she has come to love the visions and felt that the seizures are a small price to pay for her ecstasy. She could not imagine going back to a prayer life that was ordinary and mundane, but she also realized that living in an order means she had to think of the entire community, not just herself. When she had a seizure, someone had to take care of her, if only for an hour. Someone else had to stop their work, cut short their ministry, in order to get her back on her feet. She realized that as time

passed the disorder and the inconvenience for others would only grow.

The ethical dilemma that Sister John faced was powerful. Should she submit to the treatment and lose her prayer life, or should she keep the disorder and inconvenience the women who lived with her in community? The slave girl who shouted at Paul wasn't given a choice, but often we are. Some of the things we find enjoyable are also destructive. We often have to trade one experience for another. A man once told me, "It was a lot more fun when I was drinking. Life was good, for me. It was terrible for my family, friends and employers, but it was good for me."

Another man once told me, "I miss smoking. It was killing me, but I liked it. I gave it up to live. I gave it up so I could play with the grandchildren I didn't yet have."

Or our choices in life might have something to do with the question that the jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" If so, check out the answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." The same thing happens twice in chapter 16, once with Lydia, and once with the jailer. The repercussions of both Lydia's and the guard's conversions extend well beyond themselves. The end of this story is that Paul was invited to have a meal with the jailer's family. They ate, gave thanks and rejoiced. That is pretty close to Eat, Pray, Love. They all wanted to be baptized, so Paul responded, the book tells us, without delay. Note, that when you change your life it touches the lives of others. When you set yourself on the right path, it washes over on the rest of your family, and many others. None of us are isolated individuals.

Sometimes we choose work or activities that cripple us emotionally or physically. We choose demanding, stressful work, which causes illness. For years, men died much younger than women. The theory was that men faced more stress. Now, of course, women can have the same choices as men, which is a mixed blessing. It is great to use your skills to do wonderful things, but it means that women are not just free to follow new careers, but they are free to have the same kinds of hypertension, heart disease, lung cancer, and other stress-related illnesses.

Or perhaps our life choices stand in the way of a deeper life with God. What prevents you from walking the road that Jesus walked? Sometimes it is as simple as developing a new discipline – the discipline of prayer. At other times, it means a new focus – away from making money to caring for God's children. At other times, it is getting rid of a habit – gambling, viewing pornography, or getting our drinking under control.

To simply stop doing something is not enough. If you cast out one demon and don't replace it, then seven more come in. We believe that you need to replace it with faith in Jesus, the Son of God. Believe in him and you will be saved. It is a promise that is tried and true.

Like Paul, we are all on a journey. For many of us Eat, Pray, Love may be a pretty good start, but you need to add one more: Believe. Eat, Pray, Love and Believe. If you do you will take care of both body and soul.

Amen. © 2010