

“When the unnamed demand freedom”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Acts 16:16-34*

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Today I'd like to share with you the very first sermon I preached as your pastor, on May 8, 2016, and wooh did I come out swinging! It's either a very special trip down memory lane, or I'm lazy. I'll let you decide.

Today, as it was then seven years ago, is Mother's Day. When Anna Jarvis organized the first formal Mother's Day commemoration in 1908, she wanted it to be a personal and religious time when children would visit with their mothers and express gratitude.

In fact, Anna was furious that Mother's Day became commercialized by greeting card companies and reduced to an hour of brunch. “A printed card,” she said, “means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world. And candy! You take a box to Mother, and then eat most of it yourself!”

Anna was inspired to create Mother's Day because of her own mother, Ann Reeves Jarvis, who held Mother's Day work clubs in the 1850s to improve sanitary conditions and to lower infant mortality by fighting disease. In the 1860s, these clubs became places for mothers, whose children were fighting and dying in the Civil War, to gather and care for wounded soldiers from both sides. After the war, Jarvis organized Mother's Friendship Day picnics and other events to reconcile former Confederate and Union soldiers.

These early Mother's Day gatherings weren't about candy. They were about women, who like Mary, mother of Jesus, witnessed the death and injury of their own children. They were about improving the conditions of women and fostering peace. They were about loving and remembering the sacrifices women made to be mothers.

Quickly, however, Mother's Day became something else. People, it seemed to Anna, were trying to profit off mothers, and she felt that women had been exploited for profit for too long. She organized boycotts and threatened lawsuits. People mocked her, the *New York Times* calling her a “frail little spinster.” When she died in 1948, the creator of Mother's Day died without children, having never married. She died blind, broke, emaciated, and surrounded by strangers. “This woman, who died penniless in a sanatorium in a state of dementia, was a woman who could have profited from Mother's Day if she wanted to,” says historian Katharine Antolini. “But she railed against those who did, and it cost her everything.”

Anna had a vision, but life turned out very differently.

I wonder if the same is true for the unnamed enslaved girl we encounter in our morning's text in the Book of Acts. What hopes did she hold as a young girl? What dreams? Did she imagine that she'd be a slave, her powers to foretell the future exploited for profit? And what freedom did she

seek when she followed Paul and Silas day after day, in the hot sun, shouting about salvation? Did she imagine that this messenger of Christ would ignore her, only to cast away her power without actually freeing her from slavery?

I don't think that's what she expected at all. I imagine her, hanging on the periphery of the group of women at the riverside earlier in this chapter, seeing Paul commission Lydia as a preacher of the gospel. I imagine her hearing Paul talk about the Council of Jerusalem, when the early Christians decided to embrace the Gentile, to dissolve all ethnic boundaries. I imagine her hearing about Christ's ascension into heaven and how he asked the disciples to go forth, united as one body, dissolved of all discord and prejudice, and witness to a love so breathtaking, so amazing, that it took the Son of God to a cross and eventually to a stone rolled away. Oh yes, I imagine her hearing that there is no longer slave or free, woman or man—that in the kingdom of God, all are free; all are servants to only one master: God.

Maybe she wants to be freed of this spirit that is part of her slavery, but I bet she also wants what Jesus typically does with such people: he talks with them, he listens, he empowers them to preach. I think of the Samaritan Woman or of Luke 8 when Jesus cures a man with demons and sends him home to declare how much God has done. I think of the hemorrhaging woman who also follows Jesus, who heals her and tells her to go in peace.

But this is not what happens in Acts 16. Now most interpreters will tell you that this is a simple miracle, that Paul has freed this woman as an act of righteous piety and concern. But that is not what the Scripture text says, and we must always return to the text. And the text says that many days passed before Paul ever did anything, and when he finally did, it wasn't to help her; it was because he was annoyed. She is a nuisance, and Paul shuts her up. We never hear of her again. She is left unnamed, vulnerable, still a slave. Paul does not emancipate her; he does not free her body. And who knows what her enslavers will do to her now that they can't profit off of her?

The horror of this passage is that Paul doesn't seem to care what happens to this girl. She's not wealthy like Lydia. She's just a slave, just a girl. And it is in that moment that we witness the limit of Paul's love, the limit of his inclusiveness, the limit of his—as opposed to Jesus Christ's—gospel.

What we see in this text is a brutal and disappointing reality. But here is the power of Scripture, because it would have been more brutal, more cruel, to cover that reality in falsehood, to act like all are free when they are not. The text is honest. It reveals, even in its silence, the brokenness of even this great moment in the birth of Christianity. And it is a great moment. For the first time, The Way, as it was known at the time, or in other words, Christianity, is being preached in Europe. Gentiles and women are becoming leaders. Boundaries and old prejudices are breaking. The kingdom of God is emerging.

But it, like Paul, just doesn't quite make it. Sin keeps its foothold. There has always been a tension between the liberating and unifying love of the gospel and the persistence of sin and empire—between the healing we want to do and the harm we sometimes do.

We know that Paul wrestled with slavery. But we also know that even Christians enslaved people. Just a few chapters earlier in Acts, in chapter 12, the disciple Peter goes to the house of a rich Christian woman. The NRSV translation says that a maid answers the door. But that's not what the Greek says. No, the Greek uses the exact same word as appears in our passage in Acts 16: paidiske, slave. A slave, owned by a Christian, answers the door. And Peter doesn't object; he doesn't say that this is an affront to the gospel. No, he laughs at her; the text makes this girl, Rhoda, a silly object of amusement.

We can try to cover this up. It'd be easy. Just as it would be easy to translate slave as maid. It would be easy, but it would be a missed opportunity, because when we reveal the truth of just how broken the church is, we empower us, God's children, to continue the work. Because of Scripture's honesty, we get to be co-authors in this grand and ongoing story of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And that's the gift of the text for us today. By leaving this girl's story unfinished, the Holy Spirit acknowledges that slavery, even today, is very real; it acknowledges that women still are denied equal rights, power, and dignity; it acknowledges that there are still children of God who are vulnerable to violence and exploitation; and it acknowledges that sometimes even our good and pious intentions have been the very things that have made them vulnerable in the first place.

The work continues, at the behest of Christ, in our hands, in the hands of enslaved girls, in the hands of mothers and women and the mad ones and all those our society silences.

Anna Jarvis may have lost her fight to redeem Mother's Day, but the fight did not end with her. Twenty years later, in 1968, Coretta Scott King, wife of Martin Luther King Jr., used Mother's Day to host a march for underprivileged women and children. And in the 1970s, women used the day to bring attention to the need for equal rights and access to childcare. Today, on this Mother's Day, we hear voices calling for family leave, for fair wages, for an end to violence against women.

Anna Jarvis was not silenced. And this girl, in our text, her words were not silenced by Paul that day either. Oh no. They echoed in the prison cell and in the ears of the jailor when he asked for salvation. They echoed as the words, not of an unnamed slave girl, but of an unnamed prophet. They echoed millennia of voices that others (and perhaps we ourselves) have deemed unworthy, unintelligible, annoying, or threatening but that have the potential to free us, maybe even save us.

And they echo still. **Amen.**