



St. Anne's Episcopal Parish
Church Circle • Annapolis, MD • 21401

Parish Offices & Education Building
Location at 199 Duke of Gloucester St.
Annapolis, MD 21401

Phone : 410-267-9333
Fax 410-280-3181
www.stannes-annapolis.org

Amy Richter

7 Easter C: Acts 16:16-34 (35-39)

May 16, 2010

St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Annapolis, MD

True Power

In this season of Easter, many of our Sunday lessons come from the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles. This book tells the story of the early church, how those first disciples fare after Jesus' resurrection, ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The gist of the entire book is this: In the power of the Holy Spirit, the disciples of Jesus have the power to do what Jesus did. Anything Jesus did, they can do too. It's about having power. And the question is, how will they use this power? When their power comes in contact with worldly power, the power of Rome, for example, what will happen?

Our first reading this morning is a story which might slip by as just another story where everything works out, a nice story where some of Jesus' followers predictably get in trouble for sharing the good news, there's a miracle, and everyone's alright in the end. But what does this have to do with us? Our story in Acts from the prison in Philippi can give us some insights about the use and abuse of power by those in charge, and the kind of power God gives us to transform lives, to give hope, to give true freedom.

Here's what happens in Philippi. Paul and Silas get into trouble because they set someone free. Paul casts a demon, a spirit of divination, out of a slave-girl. This is good news for her, but it takes away the ability of her owners to exploit her for money. So they complain to the Roman authorities about Paul and Silas. The complaint is this, "These men are Jews, and are disturbing our city. They are advocating customs that are not lawful for us Romans to adopt or observe." Do you hear it? "Those Jews. . . us Romans." This is an important difference, because it means they are not bound by the legal conventions of the time. That is, you can do things to Jews you can't do to Romans. You can treat Jews in a way you cannot treat Romans. The law won't allow you to beat a Roman publicly. The law won't permit you to publicly humiliate a Roman citizen. But

you can beat a Jew. You can allow mob violence against a Jew. You can strip a Jew naked, knowing full-well that this is especially shameful to a Jew. The Romans say, the Jews are not like us. The rules of how to treat a citizen don't apply. So Paul and Silas are stripped naked, beaten with rods, beaten by the mob, and thrown into prison.

In prison, in the midst of their dire circumstance, Paul and Silas pray and they sing hymns. All at once there's an earthquake. All the doors are opened. All the chains are unfastened.

But here's the amazing part: turns out the earthquake and the open doors aren't for Paul and Silas. Even in prison, they know they are already free. Turns out they're for the jailer. Paul and Silas and the others in the jail do not run off. They have a chance to escape, but they don't go. They don't go because they see the jailer as a human being. If the prisoners escape, the jailer will be executed. So the jailer at first draws his own sword to commit suicide. But Paul shouts, "Don't harm yourself. We're all here." The jailer is astonished. He comes and falls down at their feet.

What the jailer has seen is true power. Here in the upside down world of God's power, the ones locked inside the jail are the ones who actually are free. They have the power of God, the power of compassion. They could walk right out those open prison doors, but they choose to stay, because it means the difference between life and death to the jailer. That's freedom. That's power.

The jailer asks them, "What must I do to be saved?" What must I do to be set free?

Paul and Silas tell him about Jesus. The jailer and his whole family are baptized. And everyone rejoices. Paul and Silas see the jailer as a human being, a brother. And when they treat him like a brother, he wants to become a brother in Christ too.

This is where the lectionary – the assigned portion of scripture reading for today -- ends, but the episode actually continues, and I think its conclusion is important for us to know too. Here's what it says:

When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, "The magistrates send word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace." But Paul replied, "They have beaten us in public, uncondemned men who *are* Roman citizens, and

have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.”

Once again, Paul and Silas have a chance to get away, but *now* they won't do it, because part of the power they have is to hold others accountable for their wrongdoing. Paul and Silas are – surprise!-- Roman citizens, Jews, yes, but holding Roman citizenship. So Paul says, no way are we going to let the Roman officials sweep this under the rug. No way are we going to let them send us away in secret and pretend this never happened. We are every bit as human as you are – regardless of what label you assign us by looking at us, regardless of our citizenship. And the Romans have to come and apologize for their mistreatment of Paul and Silas. Christian power, seen in compassion and vulnerability and love, can still hold those with earthly power accountable for their actions. And Paul would preach the full humanity of all in Jesus Christ, saying, “There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

Jim Wallis tells of an event that took place in South Africa when, to all outward appearances, apartheid still had a strangle-hold on power and Nelson Mandela was still in jail.¹ Wallis was at an ecumenical service at the Cathedral of St. George's where Archbishop Desmond Tutu was presiding, when a group of the notorious South African Security Police broke into the service. Wallis writes:

“Tutu stopped preaching and just looked at the intruders as they lined the walls of his cathedral, wielding writing pads and tape recorders. ... They had already arrested Tutu and other church leaders just a few weeks before and kept them in jail for several days. ... After meeting their eyes with his in a steely gaze, the church leader acknowledged their power ... but reminded them that he served a higher power than their political authority. Then, in the most extraordinary challenge to political tyranny I have ever witnessed, Archbishop Desmond Tutu told the representatives of South African Apartheid, “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!” He said it with a smile on his face and an enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and a boldness that took everyone's breath away. The congregation's response was electric. The crowd was literally transformed by the bishop's challenge to power. From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that surrounded the cathedral and greatly outnumbered the band of worshippers, we literally leaped to our feet, shouted the praises of God and began dancing. We danced out of the cathedral to meet the

awaiting police and military forces who not knowing what else to do, backed up to provide the space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa.”

Wallis says apartheid did not die on the day Mandela was released or inaugurated. It died on the day of that celebration in the church, when Archbishop Tutu told the truth: we are already free – come join us.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas used the power of Jesus, power seen in compassion, praise, vulnerability, care, proclamation of good news, and holding the worldly authorities accountable for their use of power. That’s the power of Jesus Christ given to his followers, the power of God still living and active in this world, power we can have and use.

How will you use the power God has already given you?

¹ In *God's Politics*.