

MAY 5
9AM | 11AM

broken
open



Rev. Paul
Melrose

TRANSFORMATIVE
COMMUNITY

Sunday, May 5, 2024 | *Transformative Community*
“Broken Open” | Acts 16:20-40 | Rev. Paul Melrose

This passage from Acts presents us with a powerful part of the human condition: how often we are confined, restrained, imprisoned, constrained, in so many different ways, whether by fear, defensiveness, needing to protect ourselves from a perceived or actual threat, violation of a rule or law, or finding ourselves a threat to an individual, or group or some power who feels the need to put us down, deny us who we are and have been created to be.

In this passage: we have the slave girl, enslaved by her condition in life as a slave, as well as being a slave to the demon that possesses her, her masters enslaved in their role as masters of one who can no longer produce, she not being an equal and now enslaved to less money, poverty? Paul and Silas, not only in fear of their preaching or teaching getting them in troubles with the Roman masters, overlords, but also as one as speculated in fear of jail again, brutal as we hear it described in this passage, the jailer, enslaved by the fear that if the prisoners escape he might not just be punished but possibly physically punished or put to death, and the whole reality that all the people in this passage are in slavery to the Roman Empire, who did not like nor could they afford any kind of potential rebellion.

We are here dealing with what one observer writes, with both physical chains and spiritual chains. All our lives are not only internally entangled with each other, but all our lives are entangled with each other as well. When one of us is in bondage then all of us are in bondage, though we may not always know it or recognize it.

As Fanny Lou Hamer put it “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” Our collective liberation requires that we first acknowledge our connectedness.

The lives we live are free to live in, and through them we are trapped in them.

Some examples:

My daughter came out to us about 20 years ago. In a personal statement, which both she and her wife took turns doing at their reception, Rebecca made the remark that coming out to her for a time was like entering another unsafe and uncertain space. Unsure, not just within herself at first, but in our society which still denies the reality of the many ways people are created and live their lives, would she find herself alone, or maybe with a roommate or two?

But... something broke open for her. It was in church, ironically, or maybe the spirit at work, where she met April. As she became vulnerable within herself, listening to her heart and her deepest desire, the rest is history. April and Rebecca married in December, at Hollywood United Methodist Church in California. Sue and I were invited to assist at the time of serving communion.

So... A breaking open deep from within, where an old fear dies, is mourned even as new life and possibilities emerge.

I found myself trapped in a feeling of despair, this winter, as I was reading and living with the realities, as we all are of book banning, and gender and sexual discrimination and potential denial of healthcare, our United Methodist Church still living under a 52-year prescription that homosexuality is not compatible with Christian teaching denial of woman for medical care and the threat of my vote, perhaps, in the future being taken away, though people of color and others struggle with that now.

In all of this, Sue and I attended Natalie & Derek Handley's (*ivory + craft*) concert over at Christ Presbyterian. As they explained it, this song cycle of original songs was their way of working through a confinement we all experienced during COVID. They began the program with a song which contained the line, "Not by bread alone can I make it on my own. O spirit lead me." Later in the concert was a song entitled "Broken Open." The lyrics: "Pause for a while, grieve for a while..." "Broken open... even as we mourn, something new is born...." "Torn apart, ready for a brand new start..."

My inner jail, though, became our meeting place for their message. Henri Nouwen tells us that:

“...Frequently our prison makes us think about freedom, hunger helps us to appreciate food, and war gives us words for peace. Not seldom are our visions

of the future born out of the suffering of the present and our hope for others out of our own despair. Only few happy endings make us happy but often someone's careful and honest articulation of the ambiguities, uncertainties and painful conditions of life gives us new hope. The paradox is indeed that new life is born out of the pains of the old. You don't think your way into a new kind of living. You live your way into a new kind of thinking."

Here are some, though not all, the things I found.

I read a powerful book, *Hidden Conversations*, by Michelle Norris, about a project she began in 2010. She started a project which has accumulated over 500,000 responses to the request, first left on card lying around and now circulated almost any way you can imagine, to answer this question: RACE, your story, 6 words, send.

The responses came back eventually from many places in the world, "You're pretty for a black girl. White privilege, enjoy it, you earned it. Urban living has made me racist. I'm only Asian when it's convenient. Too Black for Black Men's love."

While Norris had so many thoughts about where this could project lead, she finally settled on what is needed bridge builders, people who will travel back and forth to start of restart...communication, conversation, even collaboration. Coming from hearts broken open... living into a new way of thinking.

Darryl Davis, a blues musician for a long time, developed an interesting sideline to his music. For over 30 years, he has befriended over several hundred Ku Klux Klans members, and many of those over time have left the Klan and turned their robes over to him. He was playing music in a bar white bar one night, when a guy approached him, obviously admiring how he played.

The white guy, for the purposes of being true to how I read the story, said to Davis, "You know this is the first time I ever heard a black man play piano like Jerry Lee Lewis..." After his reaction to that settled, Davis responded that Lewis got his style from black and blues and other black styles and artists. The white guy did not believe him.

Then, Davis recounts, as they were at the bar together, after Davis had completed a set, "You know that this is the first time I ever sat down and had a drink with a black man." It was only a little later that the white guy told Davis, "I'm a member of the Ku

Klux Klan.”

Music brought them together. The beginning of each of them in their own ways, breaking open the walls that prevented them from being as people with each other.

In the text, we see Paul and Silas praying and singing. Worship one has said is a frequent metaphor for the power of worship to shake the foundations of despair. The shaking of the foundations leads to the expansion of the Christian community, the jailer asked what I must do to be saved...please help me. And the answer: believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Live your way into a new way of being. Let your heart break open and mourn as we see the new possibilities God has before us.

The truth be told, we live our lives moving in and out of prisons, confinements of different kinds all the time.

Now we will celebrate communion. The hunger we experience in prison helps us to appreciate food. The breaking open in the prison was the beginning of a transformed community as the jailer and family, maybe even the other prisoners, came to Christ. We will do that now. Chef Jose Andres has said,” we take the risk (of feeding in Ukraine, Gaza and elsewhere) because we want to change the world. We are living into a new way of thinking).

Food is a universal human right – feeding each other, cooking, and eating together is what makes us human. A plate of food is a plate of hope, a message that someone somewhere cares for you. So, it is not by bread alone, but all those who it represents, as it is broken old habits and prisons and rigid and scary and limiting ways are broken, you see Paul and Silas were slaves in their own way. They were slave to Christ, in whose way we find the freedom to be who God created us to be.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.