

Back in the olden days when I was in high school, my friends and I used to gather at a friend's house. We would play pool and listen to what youth today describe as "Classic Rock," though when we were listening, it was called "Today's Greatest Hits." We jammed to Billy Joel when he was still skinny, and to the pioneers in Christian Contemporary Music like Petra and Randy Stonehill.

ESPN had just started, and "Video Killed the Radio Star" had just kicked off MTV. But nobody had cable in their house, so we had access to just four channels. So we watched shows like *MacGyver*, where the star of the show could solve complex problems with everyday materials he finds at hand, using just duct tape and his Swiss Army knife.

If the writers of *MacGyver* and more recent action shows like *Lost* were looking to the New Testament for story ideas, they'd probably look to the book of Acts. It's got great stories, like shipwrecks, and snakebites, a guy escaping town in a basket, bizarre dreams, and jail breaks. It's the only book in the Bible that I know of that tells about a guy falling asleep in church! And it offers a pretty good reason why you shouldn't do that, but that's a sermon for another day.

You'll remember that Acts is the second half of a two-part collection—it fits together with the Gospel of Luke. Acts has sometimes even been described as the "fifth Gospel." But unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, this one has very little about Jesus' activities on earth. It's just the first 11 verses that summarize the time between Easter and Jesus' ascending into heaven.

So if Acts is the second book in a two-part story, you can also think of this as the second piece of a two-part sermon that Neil began last week. Today's text is a long one, beginning at verse 11 of chapter 16 and continuing through verse 40. There's a little overlap with last week's scripture, but we need it for the context. And because it's such a long text, I've asked our scripture readers to read it in sections. We'll work our way through the text, and then I'll suggest some things that this story might have us think about today. Let's begin by hearing verses 11 through 18.

READER 1: ¹¹We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you

have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ 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.

So last week, Neil introduced us to Lydia and the town of Philippi. Philippi was an old city, about 400 years old. It’s named for Philip, the son of Alexander the Great. When the Romans captured the city, the emperor Octavian made it a military outpost and populated the city with war veterans. Very possibly one of those war veterans will be the jailer we’ll hear about in a little while. So Philippi has a blend of Greek and Roman culture.

Philippi will be a favorite city of Paul’s. The writer of Luke gives more space to Paul’s time there than he does to any of the cities that Paul visits on his second and third missionary trips. You can feel the love Paul has for the people there when he writes his letter to the Philippians. For example, he uses the word “joy” 16 times in 104 verses. It seems to be the first place that Paul establishes house churches. And as Neil named last week, it’s the first church on European soil.

A key figure in the church at Philippi is Lydia, and she is the woman Neil introduced us to last week. You’ll remember that Lydia is the head of a household, which is an unusual thing for a woman. She’s a “dealer in purple cloth,” which seems to suggest that she has some wealth. As the head of her household, we assume that’s she’s single, though we don’t know whether she’s a widow, divorced, or never married. With her name and her birth in Thyatira, she’s likely a Gentile, but somehow she has become a “worshiper of God.”

Paul’s normal pattern when he gets to a city is to stop first at the synagogue, but Philippi doesn’t seem to have one, perhaps because it doesn’t have the ten Jewish males that are required for a synagogue. So Paul and Silas and Luke and Timothy head to the river, more than a mile out of town. That is the most common place for believers to gather in a town without a synagogue.

God opens Lydia’s heart, she is converted, and baptized, and she “prevails upon” the missionaries to stay at her home. One day, as they’re following their pattern of heading down to the river to pray, they meet this slave girl. You could say that she’s a slave twice over, first because she’s owned by her masters, and second because she is controlled by a spirit.

Because this spirit allows her to predict the future, she brings her owners a great deal of wealth. She follows along behind Paul and the others, and she cries out that “these men are slaves of the Most High God.” That wouldn’t have sounded unfamiliar to the people around her, since the same words are used by Greeks to describe Zeus.

But Paul is human. He gets annoyed by this pestering. And after several days of putting up with it, he turns to the girl and says to the spirit, "I order you *in the name of Jesus*, to come out of her." And it happens! We don't hear from the slave girl again, unless maybe she's one of the women Paul refers to when he writes his letter to the Philippians.

Let's listen to what happens next:

READER 2: ¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

So, Paul upsets the fruit basket. The slave girl's owners have lost their way of making money, so they grab Paul and Silas and haul them to the marketplace to meet the Philippi Chamber of Commerce.¹ These owners don't like what Paul has done any more than the Pork Dealers Association liked Jesus when he sent the demon into a herd of pigs in Luke 8. Or any more than the International Brotherhood of Silver Artisans will like Paul when he exorcises demons in Acts 19. Mess with the money, and people will react. These owners are in direct contrast to Lydia. She has wealth, and she uses it on behalf of the gospel, hosting Paul and his buddies. These owners have wealth, but they fear it, so they come after Paul.

But Paul's captors are smart enough to know that going to the Roman authorities and whining about a loss of income isn't going to get Paul punished. So instead they come with a pair of made-up claims. They appeal to religion and politics. "He's a Jewish troublemaker," they say. "And he's teaching practices that 'aren't lawful for us Romans.'" The previous year, the emperor Claudius had evicted the Jews from Rome, so anti-Semitism is high in the empire. This can sound a lot like our society today. When we see a picture of a dark-skinned Middle Easterner, for example, too easily we jump to politics and race, automatically assuming they are a Muslim terrorist out to harm our American lifestyle.

But the crowds join in attacking Paul and Silas, and they are stripped and beaten and thrown into jail. Not just any cell, but the innermost one. Maximum security. With their feet in stocks.

Let's hear the next section:

¹ I owe these titles to William H. Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, p. 139.

READER 3: ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ 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.

So late at night, Paul and Silas are sitting in jail with their feet in stocks. And they're singing. Rejoicing in all circumstances is a common theme for Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always." "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance." "Whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." "Rejoice always." All of those are words from Paul's letters.

And suddenly, God intervenes. Two weeks ago, the JYF talked about how God intervened in the life of Joseph. Paul. Back in chapter 5, an angel opens the prison doors and lets the apostles free. In chapter 12, an angel appears and leads Peter out of jail. This time, God intervenes with an earthquake. Earthquakes are common in this area, but there's no indication from the text that it was felt beyond the jail site. But like God did for Joseph, and Peter, and others before, God intervenes in Paul's life to make sure that God's work will go forward.

One place the earthquake *was* felt was in the jailer's quarters. The jailer comes running, and he sees the gates are open. Naturally, he assumes that all the prisoners have escaped, so he pulls his sword to kill himself. The Roman penalty for allowing a prisoner to escape was death, so it would be more honorable to commit the act yourself than to submit yourself to the authorities.

But Paul yells and assures the jailer that all were still there. The jailer falls on his feet asking what he must do to be saved—the same words that show up frequently in the New Testament. And Paul gives the same formula that Peter gave at Pentecost, that he gave to Cornelius, and that he gave to those gathered at the Jerusalem council: "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." The jailer does believe, along with his entire household.

And then the jailer, like the Good Samaritan before him, the jailer washes the wounds of a man who has been beaten. He hears the word of the Lord, and he invites Paul to his table.

Let's hear the final verses:

READER 4: ³⁵ When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” ³⁶ And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, “The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.” ³⁷ 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.” ³⁸ The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; ³⁹ so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ After leaving the prison they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

When the morning came, the police come to free Paul and Silas and to tell them to leave. Perhaps they figured that a beating, an overnight in jail, and instructions to get out of Dodge are an appropriate sentence for a misdemeanor. But Paul would have none of it, and he plays his trump card. “I’m a Roman citizen,” he says. “It was illegal for you to punish me in this way.”

Roman citizenship carried perks with it. Roman citizens could buy and sell property. They were exempt from certain taxes. And they were protected by Roman law. They were subject to *Rome*, not to provincial authorities. Paul demands a public apology. They knew that by illegally beating Paul, they had subjected themselves to potential punishment, and they were eager to cover their own hide, so they apologize and lead him out of town.

And in the closing verses, the story comes full circle. Paul and Silas return to Lydia’s home. When they had seen and encouraged the brothers, they went on their way.

So what might we learn from this action adventure that’s better than any episode of *MacGyver*, or of *NCIS*? or even *Duck Dynasty*? I’d like to conclude with several brief observations:

No. 1: God is at work. The book we’ve been reading from is called the *Acts of the Apostles*, but a better name for it might be the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” Even though Peter and Paul are the earthly stars of the show, the clear message of the book is that the Spirit is at work in the formation of the early church, beginning at Pentecost and carrying through Paul’s missionary journeys and his final trip to Rome:

- It’s not Paul who saves Lydia—it was the Lord who opened her heart.
- It’s not Paul who saved the slave girl—it was the name of Jesus that brought the spirit out.
- And it wasn’t Paul who saved the jailer—it was the word of the Lord.

Remembering that it is God working among us is a challenge we face today. Our society encourages us to be strong, to strive for independence. Few people are praised more than the self-made man, and I use the word “man” intentionally. And it’s something we face in the church as well. As we form our plans and directional statements, we must never forget that it won’t be through our efforts that the church will grow. It will be through God working in our

world, and it is our task to constantly be joining in God's work, rather than telling God what we think should be done.

No. 2: There is a formula. Just like on TV shows, throughout the book of Acts we see variations on the same theme. Instruction leads to conversion, which leads to baptism, which leads to fellowship with other believers. Believe on the Lord, and you will be saved. It worked for the believers at Pentecost. It worked for Cornelius. And it worked for Lydia and the jailer.

The same formula works today. Starting today, a number of our youth will take part in a baptism exploration class. That is instruction. It builds on the instruction they have received along the way. That is instruction from the families they live with **and** the church family they have grown up with. In the class, we'll also talk about conversion, about how conversion happens in many ways. There is the sudden conversion that Paul experienced on the way to Damascus, and there is the gradual conversion that happened for Peter as he alternated between saying "you are the Christ" and denying him; as he alternated between walking on the water in faith and sinking when he walked away; and how he finally became the one on which the Holy Spirit would build God's church.

But after we believe, we are called to action.

Which brings me to No. 3. Lydia believed and was baptized. And she immediately began to live into that baptism by offering fellowship to Paul and his buddies. The jailer believed, and he too immediately began to live into his baptism by washing Paul's wounds, and fellowshiping with him as well. "While his joy reflects the vertical part of a relationship with God, his help and hospitality is a horizontal dimension of faith."² Perhaps without even knowing it, he was loving his neighbor as himself.

Fellowship and the breaking of bread is a key part of Luke and Acts. Not every meal involved communion—it sounds like only Paul and Silas got to eat at the jailer's house. But virtually every meal in Luke and Acts has sacramental overtones.

And again, we are called to the same kind of hospitality today. Children, each time you say a kind word to a friend at school, rather than acting like a bully, you are sharing the body and blood of Christ. JYFers, each time you give a \$20 bill to a person during Pay It Forward, and MYFers, each time you prepare a meal for Interfaith Hospitality Network, you are sharing the body and blood of Christ. Adults, each time you put a check in the offering plate, or engage in a meaningful conversation with the "other," or a myriad other things, you are sharing the body and blood of Christ.

In all of these ways, the Holy Spirit is at work.

² Gerhard A. Krodel, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Acts*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2009, p. 313.

- The Lord opened Lydia's heart and she was set free to play a key role in the church at Philippi.
- The name of Christ cast out a spirit of divination and the slave girl was set free from her slavery.
- The word of the Lord set the jailer free from his fear of death.
- And today, the Spirit sets us free as well to live into our baptisms in new ways each and every day.

May it be so.