

*Paul and Silas bound in jail
Had no money for to go their bail
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on*

*Paul and Silas thought they was lost
Dungeon shook and the chains come off
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.*

Throughout history, praying and the singing of hymns have been **subversive** actions people of faith have taken to bring about change within the established order. These actions have moved people to engage culture, to act, and to work for change. We saw this during the Civil Rights Movement as people subversively worked for equality, civil rights, and policy change in society. People of faith routinely sang hymns like *We Shall Overcome* and *Keep Your Eyes On The Prize*, the hymn I just quoted. The time is upon us when we must do this again as we face our culture's brokenness. We must confess the idolatry of our worship of guns. We must confess our malignant ideology of extreme individualism and personal rights, face our captivity to guns, face the evil plague of gun violence in this land, and work for change. We have been acting subversively this morning as we began worship with a litany *Lamenting Gun Violence* and then sang the hymn *If We Just Talk Of Thoughts And Prayers*. We act subversively as we do this, while at the same time working for change within the context of

the present established order of rule in this country. **Activities like these have been an aspect of the faith community for centuries.**

As the Jesus movement was born and began to spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christianity both helped to **subvert** the long Roman domination in people's lives and at the same time preserve what was best within it. In fact, as we think about Jesus' own ministry, he was always **subverting** the established order – not only the civil order of the day, but also the religious order. Sharing and living the good news of Jesus has **always** been a subversive form of living because **Jesus brings change to established order imposed by the world.** And, today we find Paul and Silas living into this aspect of a life of faith as we hear more about their adventures while spreading the good news of Jesus. They are living into this aspect of a life of faith as they act to **heal** a slave girl, **pray**, and **sing hymns** while facing their present context within the established order of Roman rule.

Having been led by a vision to go to Macedonia, this missionary team wanders into Philippi. They begin **engaging** people with the gospel and **engaging the culture** in significant ways. Last week we heard about one of their first encounters. They had a conversation with Lydia who owned a thriving business in expensive purple cloth. She became one of their first

supporters and was not only converted to be a follower of this person, Jesus, she offered her home as headquarters for Paul's Philippian ministry.

Today we initially find Paul and Silas having an encounter with another business, one that is fueled by a woman's brokenness and captivity. They encounter a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit **not** of God, but a spirit that could tell people's fortunes. This girl's supposed "gift" meant she was owned and used as a commodity, providing her owners with a small, profitable business. Finding herself drawn to Paul and Silas, she **names** who they are and what they are doing. Much like a broken record, she repeatedly shouts her message saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, and they are telling you the way to be saved." Well, Paul finally has enough and becomes annoyed. In frustration he turns around and performs an exorcism right there and then. And, as he releases this girl from oppression, we find that economics and religious convictions collide. The owners of the slave girl and this "Psychics-R-U's" business become furious because they now have lost their lucrative income. The economic system they had in place **depended** on this slave girl's illness, it depended on her not being well. So, boom!! When she becomes well, the system goes into panic mode. Her owners gather the civic leaders to make sure they all understand the economic impact the

actions of Paul and Silas are having on their lives. They complain to the authorities that Paul and Silas are political subversives, undermining Roman order.

Because the authorities agree that they are **subversives**, Paul and Silas are arrested and beaten with rods for setting someone free, someone who was captive to evil. Then, they are shackled and thrown into prison. And what do they do? Of course, **they have a hymn sing!** Shackled and imprisoned they live their faith and **subversively** sing hymns. You see, that is the character of those who are **truly** free. Paul and Silas are so centered in God and in God's reign and dream for this world they can sing **regardless** of their circumstances. Their singing continues into the deepest darkness of midnight when, suddenly, the earth beneath them shakes and quakes so powerfully that their shackles fall off.

As the earth shakes and quakes, the jailer awakes. He awakes to find the doors of the prison wide open. Terrified of what would happen to him when his superiors discover he has lost the prisoners; the jailer decides to kill himself. Paul stops him just in time, calling out to the jailer with words that stop him short saying, "Do not harm yourself; we are all here." The jailer then asks one of Scripture's most profound questions, **"What must I do to be saved?"**

Now, the jailer's question is key to this whole narrative. Theologian Ronald Cole-Turner suggests, "Whenever the jailer's question is asked, the obvious counter-question is, 'Saved from what?' Sword in hand, the jailer was probably thinking about how to be saved from the wrath of the authorities. However, his question has come to mean much more, depending on who is asking it." So, I ask, what must we do to be saved from bondage, from this country's addiction to guns, from the oppression of this addiction? What must we do to be saved from the bondage and oppression of economic systems that enable this addiction, from the seduction of authoritarian power, from the divisive hatred that exists in our present culture? How much of our economic system, our political system, our judicial system, our local government systems, and even our family systems are dependent upon so many of us not being well? The reality is that **any** system that operates **without** compassion and commitment for the **good of all** is not only broken, it puts people in bondage.

Paul's answer to the jailer is deceptively simple as he takes the action to yet another level. Paul's answer, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," is an invitation to the jailer and each one of us to tune in to the level of **God's** action in this world. As we tune into God's redeeming action and God's storyline, we are grasped and taken into the gospel story of

transformation and redemption. And, quite frankly, this tuning **into** God is also a **subversive** act, because to tune into Christ as the one with dominion in our lives is to **subvert** whatever earthly powers claim the same dominion over our lives. To be a Christian **is** to be subversive. In fact, **that is the story of the subversive gospel of the cross! God's love was made manifest in Jesus' death on a cross.** When talking about living the subversive life of a Christian, theologian Douglas John Hall writes:

The gospel of the cross is not about rescuing us from our finitude; it's about a compassionate God's solidarity with us in our creaturehood and the slow grace of divine suffering-love which, without pretending finality, effects its **social and personal transformations from within**. It is the nature of our subversion that makes us so unique.

We, as people of faith, live the subversive gospel of the cross. We are changed from within, and we subversively live that change in this world. The change God will affect through us over earthly powers will come from our witnessing to the **grace, healing, and love** of the Lord Jesus Christ in our daily lives. So, centered in the gospel of the cross, we keep working for **change**. As we tune into God's story of grace and redeeming love for the life of this world, we do not have to be overcome by fear or **anything** that would hold us in bondage. And, like Paul and Silas, we subversively sing of God's love and saving grace **regardless** of the circumstances of this present day and our present lives. "Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on."