

“Onward and Upward”

What an immense privilege it is for Priscilla and me to be among you today to celebrate the life of this great church. The odor of this place is hard-wired into the reptilian portion of my brain. Walk through the door, breathe deeply, and twenty-two years melt away and it feels like home. Thank you for all that you have meant in our lives, and for the opportunity to be with you today. And a special Thank You to Scott, whose able leadership, expansive generosity and boundless spirit of hospitality are immense gifts to us all.

160th Anniversary, eh? Not much of a ring to that, is there? Do any of you academic types know what that would be in Latin? It sounds to me as though somebody has been looking for an excuse to have a party! And why not? There is so much to celebrate here! The recent Annual Reports bear no resemblance whatsoever to the familiar red-ink-hand-wringing of some years past... I remember it well. A spirit of welcome and of mission permeates the place. And two recent arrivals say so much: your Refugee Family who arrived in April; and Katie Miller, who will join the staff June 1. Why *not* party? And you really did it up right last night! Thanks to Judy Blazek and the whole anniversary committee for a job well done! God is good! And, by the way, as Scott mentioned earlier, the “Onward and Upward” theme comes from founder Reuben Gaylord’s sermon on the occasion of the 17th anniversary of the church. With all due respect to Janis Ian, who many years ago learned the truth at seventeen, that number doesn’t really sing, either.

But who cares? Let’s keep it rolling! Let’s read the Bible! Today’s lesson, served up by the lectionary, happens to be one of my favorite passages!

Paul and Silas are in Philippi, where they are doing what they always do: spreading the news about God’s love and calling people to faithful response. As they are on their way to pray one day, they encounter a slave girl with a spirit of divination... she’s a psychic. She makes a lot of money for her owners, who evidently have a website, countless likes on Facebook and a 900-number for her. Well, when this spiritually-connected young woman sees Paul and Silas, she begins to sound off: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She wants the world to know... and she won’t keep quiet about it. At first, it seems that Paul and Silas welcome the free publicity. But after several days of this, they have had quite enough. So Paul, out of annoyance more than compassion, turns on the girl and says to the spirit possessing her, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” It does. That should be cause for great rejoicing, right?

Right...except that suddenly the Philippi Chamber of Commerce sees Paul and Silas in a different light. Whereas previously they had been a curiosity, perhaps something akin to the travelling philosophers who debated in the forum—like

presidential candidates showing up at the 7 Eleven during primary season—now they see something different. The scales fall from their eyes, as it were, and now they recognize outside agitating Jewish foreigners when they see them, and they see them now that there is an interruption in the cash flow. Without the spirit possessing her, the slave girl has lost her powers: no hits on the website; the hotline shuts down; the owners are mad. So they gather up Paul and Silas and drag them, appropriately, into the marketplace. The fine, upstanding citizens of Philippi can't wait to play Flog the Foreigner. When they're tired of that they play Jail the Jews. Paul and Silas are thrown into the innermost cell at the very center of the prison; and, for good measure, their feet are fastened in stocks. It's stocks and bonds for subverting the economy.

There they are, wondering what will become of them. Can you imagine the scene? It's pitch dark. They are bruised and bleeding. They have no idea what will come with the daylight. So what do they do? What *do* they do? They sing hymns.

I find this one of the most provocative images in all of scripture. Paul and Silas are drawing upon their hymnals of the heart as a way of re-connecting with what matters most. What do you suppose they sang? We don't know. Our information about worship among early Christians is tantalizingly incomplete.

What would you sing? There's always *Amazing Grace*: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Imagine yourself in the dark in prison, singing about all that you can see. This is powerful stuff. What else do we know by heart? Christmas carols? An Easter hymn or two? *Be Thou My Vision*? The richness or poverty of our spiritual resources is revealed here. What could we recite, or say, or sing, that would be a reminder and an affirmation of convictions we hold and that also hold us? During the Civil Rights Movement they had songs to sing: *We Shall Overcome*, *Down by the Riverside*, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round*, *Keep Your Eyes on the Prize*... Hymnals of the heart become all important in times of trial.

Did you notice what happens in the story? Paul and Silas are singing their hearts out and praying, and the other prisoners are listening to what is going on. And suddenly there is a huge earthquake. All right, it doesn't say it was huge—only big enough to bust open that prison and release Paul and Silas. And what do they do then? They stay right where they are. How could they possibly be more free than when they are singing their hearts out? See? This is a great story!

But it gets even better! In comes the jailer, who is distraught. All he can see is that the prisoners are free to go, which means that they will escape, and he will be held responsible and will lose his head, literally. So he decides it would be better to kill himself, and he prepares to do so, when Paul informs him that he and Silas are still just sitting there in the dark: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer has light brought in and, sure enough, the prisoners are just sitting there. So the jailer leads them out of the prison: what's the point of a prison if nobody's going to run away? And he says to Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" What do you suppose he means, exactly? What must I do to be free as you are free—whether you are walking the streets

or bound in prison? What must I do to find the peace you know, when I was about to kill myself? What have you found that I haven't? Or what (or who) has found you?

Paul and Silas tell him about Jesus: about a love from which nothing in all creation can ever separate us; about the one who conquered death to bring abundant and everlasting life; about the one who taught us to love one another. And then there is this great scene: water is brought so that the jailer can wash the wounds of Paul and Silas... and from the same source of water, Paul baptizes the jailer. One set of wounds you can see; the other you can't. But these people, seemingly from different worlds—captive and free, Jew and Greek—cleanse one another.

This is one of the great themes of Acts: through one another, across a great divide, very different people find the same healing, restorative love of God. Isn't that when we really feel God's presence: when barriers are broken down, differences overcome, woundedness shared and healing embraced? Isn't that when we experience the Gospel?

There's a neat little postscript to this story. The next morning the authorities decide they've had enough of Paul and Silas, and send word to let them go. But they won't leave until the magistrates come and apologize to them. Now you tell me, who is free and who is in bondage? By the end of this story, everything is standing on its head. The slave girl is worthless as a commodity because she has found her worth as a human being. The authorities who locked up Paul and Silas so they wouldn't run away, now can't get rid of them. The folks supposedly in authority, are powerless.

And the still point in all that turnaround is the singing of the hymns at midnight... which makes me think a bit differently about what it might mean to be an Onward and Upward congregation in the twenty-first century: two things. (I realize there are supposed to be three, but I'm retired; you can come up with your own third point—it will be better than mine, anyway.)

First of all, this is a story about the Gospel, the Good News of God's love and the power of that love to strike down all of what Ephesians calls the "dividing walls of hostility." You know about this power because you've experienced it when you made the choice to become Open and Affirming and when you called Scott Jones to be your Sr. Minister. And just look at what God is doing in your midst!

Secondly—and you know this, too—this matter of taking on dividing walls of hostility is hard work! It is soul-searching work, discouraging work, dangerous work sometimes. And I cannot think of a time when it is more important work than in this current season of toxic political rhetoric. To remain onward and upward on the 160-year trajectory of this wonderful church will mean taking on new challenges, identifying new barriers that divide and demean people, living God's love in new ways.

Where do we find courage to do that? We find it from our faith: from the seeds of courage and hope planted *here* through worship and through education and through living in community together. What the church will need as much as anything will be new ways to internalize the faith, to access our hope, to share our love and to express our joy.

Bearing faithful witness to God's love will require tending those hymnals of the heart to which we return (and resort) again and again during trying times. Some of those hymns we already know by heart; many more of them have yet to be written. But as people of faith we must write them, learn them, love them, and live them.

What you are doing here matters so much! It matters to you, it matters to God and it matters to the world as barriers are overcome and lives are healed and transformed. 160 years? How wonderful! Reuben Gaylord would be proud, unless of course he deemed pride to be unseemly. But I think it's pretty seemly; and surely the best is yet to come. On to the 161st anniversary! Onward and upward! And to God be the glory: today, tomorrow and forever.

Amen

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