

Series: Paul's Second Missionary Journey

Sermon: Leave. Just Leave

Acts 16:35-40 (NIV)

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." ³⁶ The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace."

³⁷ But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

³⁸ The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. ³⁹ They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

Sermon

I don't know if you've been to Disneyland recently, but they've made some changes over the past few years. Once change is the introduction of the Fast Pass system. You know Disney, known for its popularity, and for its long lines. Everywhere you go, there's a line. Line for rides, line for food, line for the bathroom. There's lines to get into the next line. You can have an app on your phone to tell you what the currently wait time is for most of their attractions. I looked it up as I was writing this sermon. Pirates of the Caribbean. 35 minutes. Haunted Mansion 25 minutes. Peter Pan. 1 hour. Dumbo. 1.5 hours. Have you seen the Dumbo ride? That is not worth 1.5 hours. Frozen. 2.5 hours. You can watch the whole frozen movie while in line for the five minute ride. But now there is a Fast Pass System! Each day, you can get a couple of fast passes that let you skip the long line, and get into a much shorter line. In essence, everyone has the ability to skip the lines a couple times during their Disney adventure. Granted, you had to get a special little card at the entrance to the ride, and it told you what time to return. All day long, I would run all over the park getting fast passes for my family to maximize their ride experience. But sometimes, you would get into the fast pass line, and you would catch the looks of the others who were in the slow as hades line. And they were not good looks. But hey, everyone can do the fast pass system - so it's fair. But they changed it even more. You don't have to go get those little tickets anymore. It's now on your Disney ticket that you carry around. You just flash your tix, and away you go. You still get 3 or 4 fast passes a day. But now, I'm starting to wonder. Is there another class of people whose Disney tickets are all set up to have fast passes all of the time? It's the cynic in me, I know. But do certain VIP's get to skip the lines, all the time, and jump ahead of the rest of us? That doesn't sound American! You wait in line with the rest of us. I am not used to being treated as a second class citizen! Yes, I will continue to use the Fast Pass system, but now I think about it less as a chance to get ahead, and more of the ways that privilege is built into the system.

Last week, we looked at Paul and Silas being beaten and thrown into prison. You remember the story - the earthquake happens, the jailor gets saved, literally and spiritually. And today we have the conclusion.

At the break of day those magistrates - the ones who had Paul and Silas beaten, sent word to the jailor to release the prisoners. And they find out that Paul and Silas were Roman Citizens. Why should we care, I hear you ask. Great question. First, Roman law. At the height of its glory, Rome was as complex and powerful in its world as

we can imagine the USA is in now. But the Romans ruled with a heavy hand and there were innumerable inequities and abuses. Sure, they had good roads, and general peace, but the tax system was a little screwy. Throughout its empire, Rome designated certain cities as Roman colonies, granting them rights and privileges that made its citizen happy to be under Rome. Colonies were exempt from some of the taxes and tributes that other cities and provinces had to pay. Not everyone paid taxes. Huh. Remember that Christmas story? "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed." Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to be properly enrolled for taxes which were upcoming, But Paul's family in Tarsus, a Roman colony, and the people of Philippi, although they were similarly enrolled, were not taxed, because they were citizens of colonies. The poor and working class got taxed, but some of the wealthy and connected didn't have to pay taxes. I'm glad those days are over.

Anyway . . . Citizens could also appeal a case to Caesar - but as the empire got larger and more folk became citizens, that job got farmed out as well. We had governors, consuls, proconsuls, and finally down to magistrates, who were like elected local officials, that weren't exactly elected. But their job was to keep the peace, fix problems, take care of troublemakers. And when strangers came along, they usually took the side of their own citizens, right or wrong. I'm glad those days are over. They made sure that the public peace was preserved.

But Paul had legal rights. Although he was not from Philippi, he had been born in another Roman colony. As a Roman citizen Paul well knew the laws of Rome. He had learned his civics lessons back in middle school. The VALERIAN LAW declared that every Roman citizen had a right to a fair trial. It forbade magistrates from handcuffing citizens and it virtually eliminated capital punishment. It made Paul's beating illegal, his imprisonment illegal, and the stocks illegal. This wasn't true for everyone, but it was true for all Roman citizens. The Magistrates had jumped to the conclusion that since they were foreign Jews, they couldn't possibly have the rights of citizens. Because of what they did, those magistrates could probably have been jailed themselves, if not summarily executed. So Paul had every right to raise the subject of his rights.

AND SO MY QUESTION IS THIS: Why did Paul wait until after his beating, and after the order to release him, to bring it up? Hello! I'm a citizen! If it was me - first sign of a beat stick would be, "I'm a citizen!" Maybe he was too busy getting beat up to say anything! Some might argue that during the uproar, no one would have stopped to hear his claim or to investigate it. Or maybe they would have thought he was lying about citizenship, which is also a capital offense. Paul would have been in the right, of course, but dead is dead whether legal or not.

Maybe it was to protect the small Christian community that was growing in Philippi, to offer them a little protection - maybe if they have to leave him alone, they'd leave them alone.

This is how I read the story. Paul was willing to take away his privilege to show the injustice in the system. If it's wrong to beat a Roman Citizen, maybe it's wrong to beat up a non citizen. I like to think that Paul is showing the glaring inequities in the world. How could he walk with Lydia, the jailor, and others who weren't born into citizenship if he didn't face the same consequences and harassment and abuse that they also faced.

Here's an ugly fact. The world is unfair. And we know its unfair. Did you know that you can bribe your way into college? We do now. A white woman with a black child - aw, that's sweet - she adopted him. Black man with white child - call the cops. I wish I was making this up. Matter of fact, call the cops if there is a person of color in my neighborhood. Or in the dorm room where they go to school. Or shoot them if they are in their own apartment and you walk in, thinking it was your apartment. I don't have time or the energy to go into the millions of examples of unfairness. Finish this sentence for me. - I get paid more doing my job than some other people in this same job because I am (EXAMPLES: White. Male. Young. No one said Good looking. I can take a hint).

A lot of times, I carry around a passport with me. Why? Just in case I get stopped by ICE. I don't want my kids in cages. Pastor Mike, you have nothing to worry about . . . ICE won't stop you. You don't look like . . . them.

We're still holding prisoners in Guantanamo Bay without trial, without charges. Glad they're not citizens, or it might be wrong.

I'm glad I have my driver's license that says I'm a male - otherwise the government could tell me what I could or could not do with my body.

The longer I'm alive, the more I appreciate Martin Luther King's Letter from the Birmingham Jail. I read it in high school, but since those days, I've learned a little bit more about life and how the world works. I encourage you to read it again if it's been awhile. A few quotes: Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." MLK had this to say, "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to Order than to Justice."

The world is unfair. And if you find yourself in a position of privilege, it's our job to make it more just and to listen to the voices on the outside. I know it's Memorial Day weekend, where we remember our loved ones, especially those who died in defense of this great nation. So this morning, I want to remember Silas Soule - namesake of one of our Bible heroes today.

Silas was born into a family that fought for abolitionism - freeing of slaves. His family moved to Kansas, was a friend of John Brown. His home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. In the Civil War, he enlisted, and was sent to the West - to Colorado to keep the Peace. In short order he became Captain, trying to help the Native population in this brave new world of immigration and reservation. In 1864, he was under the command of Chivington at Sand Creek in Colorado. Chivington gave the order to attack a peaceful village of Cheyenne and Arapaho. Silas refused to obey, keeping his command at a distance - and his troops watched the atrocities that followed. Chivington claimed that 500-600 natives were killed. Mostly women and children. I cannot describe it here in good company. An official inquiry was made. And despite threats against his life, Silas testified against Chivington, and gave honor to the uniform despite disobeying orders. His testimony about the events at Sand Creek led to Congress refusing the Army's request for thousands of men for a general war against the Plains Indians. Congress wanted to take soldiers from the closing out of the Civil War and throw them all at the Plains Indians - Silas stopped that. A few months later, Silas was married. 22 days after that, he was shot dead by an assassin in Denver. His killer never brought to justice. Every year, and to this day, the local tribes in ceremonial pomp and circumstance decorate his grave in Denver.

The world is not fair. Or it's more fair for some than for others. But I remember the stories of Paul who shared in the beatings and the fate of the unfortunate, of Captain Silas who gave his life so others might find justice. To live in a world where race, gender, economic standing, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, nationality don't matter - I wish I had a fast pass for a world like that. And the people of God said, AMEN.