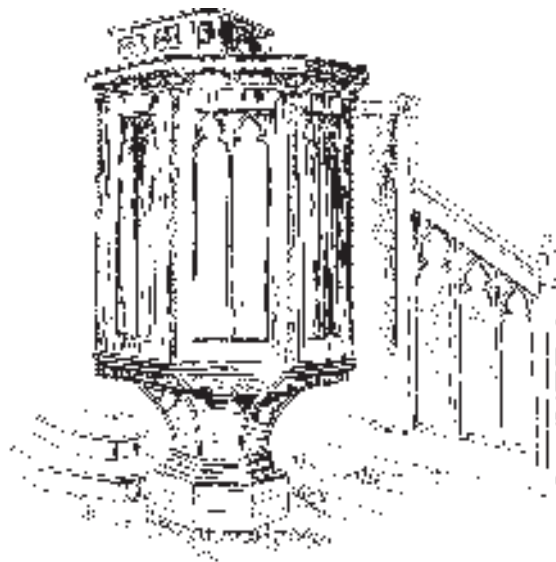


July 5, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **Are You Free?**

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Acts 16:11-40

#### **Comments on the Lesson**

Our scripture lesson today is taken from the Acts of the Apostles 16:11-40. We find ourselves here in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey as he reaches out to Gentile converts. Our narrative contains these firsts: It tells of Paul's first inroads of the gospel on European soil; it contains Paul's first confrontation with Roman justice; and it is the first of three times in Acts where the author, Luke, writes in the first person plural—we.

Four summers ago a group of travelers from Westminster was fortunate enough to visit Greece and the geological sites where this story took place.

#### **The Sermon**

I'm going to say a word. And when I say the word I want you to picture a face—to see a person or a place. Are you ready? The word is “freedom.”

*Freedom.* Do you see a face? I see the face of a good friend. He's in his early 60s, a seminary and law school graduate who spent four terms in the Albany legislature. Once a year he tries to squeeze into his 40-year-old Navy Lt. Commander's uniform. That's how I see him, marching in the Memorial Day parade in Jamestown, NY with four generations of military colleagues—right behind the Washington Jr. High School Band.

*Freedom.* Do you see a face? I see the face of an elderly black woman knocking on a cabin door in the dead of night whispering, "Mr. Lincoln says we're free."

*Freedom.* Do you see a face? I picture the bicentennial Fourth of July with the tall ships entering New York Harbor sailing past the Statue of Liberty with sky rockets going off overhead. Whew!

*Freedom.* Do you see a face? I see the face of a Chinese student on TV standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. And I hear the voice of the familiar TV announcer saying, "When I questioned these students they said they were protesting for democracy and freedom. Interestingly enough, they can't even define democracy. But, freedom! They know what freedom is."

If there is one virtue on which we can all join hands, it is freedom: freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom of choice, political freedom, and academic freedom. We in America have so many and varied freedoms we sometimes take them for granted. Did you know that in last November's election even though the turnout was the best since 1968, still one in three eligible voters didn't vote? Wouldn't the Iranians or the Chinese or the North Koreans love to have the freedom to vote in an honest election with real alternatives?

Not only do our multiple freedoms in America get taken for granted; they sometimes give us the illusion that we are free, when we aren't. The freedom to achieve—the freedom to pursue the American dream can often result in a terribly lonely, terribly driven, terribly confining existence. The corporate ladder, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed children, do-eat-dog contests for grades at the university, over commitment, time pressure—is this life in the fast lane freedom or is it captivity?

*Every Sunday, so the story goes, the ducks in a certain town waddle out of their houses and go down Main street to their church. They waddle into the sanctuary and squat in their proper pews. The duck choir waddles in and takes its place, and then the duck minister comes forward and opens the duck bible. He reads to them: "Ducks! God gave you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fence can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings, and you can fly like birds!" All the ducks shout, "Amen!" And then they all waddle home.*

This freedom thing isn't as obvious as you might think. Interestingly enough some of the best documents ever written on the subject of freedom were slipped through cell bars to friends in the outside world. John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*—freedom. Dietrich Bonhoefer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*—freedom. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*—freedom. The Apostle Paul's *Letter to the Church at Philippi*—freedom. Try contrasting our idea of freedom, as choosing from lots of alternatives, with just this one sentence from Martin Luther King, Jr., "Words cannot express the exaltation felt by the individual as he finds himself, with hundreds of his fellows, behind prison bars for a cause he knows is just." They are free!

The story begins with Paul and Silas encountering a slave girl who tells peoples fortunes. This woman made money for her owners who hired her out to read palms and provide entertainment at insurance company conventions. She took to following Paul and Silas around, shouting at them, harrassing them. Here is a picture of captivity—a "demon" or the grip of mental illness, which holds the victim in bondage. In the name of Christ, Paul cures her.

She is healed. She is free. Chained her whole life to the hell of demon possession, now she is free at least from her illness. There ought to be rejoicing. But no, her owners are not free enough to do that.

To her owners she is still a slave, a piece of property, not a real person. Her fortune telling was their meal ticket. It was fine to give ten dollars to the mental health drive last fall, but this healing—this taking away their income, is another matter. Values have somehow gotten missed up with economics here, and so her owners do what vested interests always do when vested interests are threatened. They fight back. With the help of the Chamber of Commerce and the Rotary Club, they throw Paul and Silas in jail.

Now we are faced with an even more obvious imprisonment—Paul and Silas in the maximum-security cell—their legs in stocks. Here is captivity; but no, wait. Can you hear them? The story says these men in chains are singing, praying. Praising God in jail?

Well, you remember what happens next? God intervenes; the earth heaves; the prison shakes; the doors fly open and the prisoners' chains fall off. The jailer wakes, and when he sees that the doors are open, he is horrified. Knowing the fate of Roman jailers who permit their prisoners to escape, he draws his sword and prepares to do the honorable thing. You see having the key to someone else's cell does not make you free. Iron bars do not a prison make.

Paul shouts, "Don't do it. We're all here, just singing." The jailer says, "But you were bound in chains, now you are free to escape." Paul says, "No, we prisoners have been free all along but you, our jailer, were chained and now you are free to escape."

And the jailer, says, "Help me. What must I do to be saved?" (v. 30). What do I have to do to be free? And he was baptized.

What is freedom? In this story, everyone who at first appears to be free—the slave girl's owners, the crowd, the jailer—is a slave. And everyone who at first appears to be enslaved—the slave girl, Paul, Silas—is free.

The morning after the jailbreak, the magistrates send word to Paul and Silas, "Now you may go free, and blessings on your journey" (vs. 36). They still didn't get it. Paul and Silas were free all along.

How about you? Are you free? In a recent book Frederick Buechner points out that words like "repression," "denial," "sublimation," "defense," when used psychologically, all refer to one form or another of the way we erect walls to hide behind—both from each other and from ourselves—walls that enslave us. Perhaps you repress a memory that is too painful to deal with. Or you deny a weight problem. Or you conceal your sense of inadequacy behind a defensive bravado. Or whatever.

The inner state you end up with is a castle-like affair of keep, inner wall, outer wall, moat, which you erect originally to be a fortress to keep the enemy out, but which turns into a prison where you become the jailer and thus your own enemy. It is a wretched and lonely place. You can't be what you want to be there or do what you want to do. People can't see through all that masonry to who you truly are, and half the time you're not sure *you* can see who you truly are; you've been walled up so long.

Fortunately there's a way out. The jailer in our story shows us the way. Reduced to its simplest expression he says to Paul and Silas just two words—"Help me." Two words which are difficult to say. We have our pride after all. Sometimes we're not sure there's anybody we trust enough to say them to—but they're always worth saying—to another human being, a friend, a stranger? To God?

"Help me." Those words open a door through walls. They lead to freedom. Hope is possible again.