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 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
 Texts: Acts 16: 16-34; Galatians 5: 13-15
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Something More Than Free¹

I'd like to say a few things by way of introduction. Last week I put out an invitation for our community to pick some kind of physical challenge – a walk, a run, a swim, or something else of your choice – and then to do what I've called Challenging in Place this very weekend. It's a way of giving release to some of the restlessness that we all feel as a result of quarantining for more than two months. It's a way of mitigating depression. It's a way of taking our bodies seriously. It's a way of drawing us all into what is an admittedly strange, and kind of gonzo, form of community. But it's also a metaphor. It's a metaphor of the endurance we're all being asked to exhibit right now. And it's a metaphor of our spiritual life, as we follow a long and sometimes arduous path as we build cultures of compassion and care, where, as Maryam Elahi said in this week's Sacred Conversation, no one is allowed to fall through the cracks. That kind of vision takes persistence. It takes endurance. Challenging in Place is meant to capture all of those things, and I hope you're able to participate somehow. I also hope you've sent in pictures or videos to fccfoldlyme@gmail.com.

By the time this is available online, some of you will already have done your Challenges. With any luck, you had a great time out there. If you happen to be watching this on Sunday, I'll be tackling a 50 miler while you watch, making 12 or so loops on a route I do in Old Lyme. Say a little prayer for me. Or come out and say hi in front of the parsonage as I finish another lap. Or best of all, get out and do your own Challenge – it's not too late!

For those of you who pushed yourselves really hard, you'll have come upon moments when you just wanted the Challenge to be over, when you'd have given anything to bring it all to an end, even when there were still miles to go. But you know what? It did end. Or in my case (as I'm probably still out there right now) it will end! Which is a very important lesson to keep in mind during this experience of Covid-19. It will come to an end. I just finished reading John Barry's book *The Great Influenza*, about the pandemic of 1918 and 1919. That too felt like it would never end for those who were caught up in it. But it did. Not all at once. Still, it didn't go on forever. Like the Challenge, there is relief. But we've got to keep pushing through to get there. I promise, it will come.

Let me transition now to the biblical story that was read earlier. Throughout the time of Covid, it's been important to revisit some of the most formative biblical stories for the wisdom they contain. They were meant for times such as these. There's the story of Jesus walking on the water, or feeding the five thousand. There's the story of Jesus

¹ Though it has little relation to the content here, the title is borrowed from Jason Isbell's album of the same name (one well worth a listen).

emerging from a tomb, and there's the story of Moses and the burning bush. There have been others as well. But today I want us to consider the story of Paul and Silas, beaten and thrown into prison, where, even in the midst of their captivity, they manage to sing hymns, and to make a fateful decision about an opportunity afforded them. It's an extraordinary story about freedom, and it captures the tensions and dilemmas that many people in our country, and around the world, are experiencing right now. It's a story that asks what freedom actually is, and who it's for. It's a story appropriate for Memorial Day weekend, as we rightly honor those who have given their lives to the pursuit of freedom. On such a weekend, and in a time such as this, it behooves us to inquire into the forms of freedom worth sacrificing for, even as we turn away from narrower, more parochial forms of freedom.

The entire story turns on several different layers, or understandings, of freedom. There is, first of all, the act of freedom that lands Paul and Silas in prison in the first place. Paul interrupts an exploitative economic relationship between an enslaved woman and her master, which stirs up a mob, and earns Paul and Silas a beating, as well as a jail sentence. We could linger for a long time on that piece of the story, and on a different occasion we'll do so. For now, we simply need to note that Paul and Silas go to prison, where they have their freedom curtailed, because they intercede on behalf of another.

I'm far more interested in Paul and Silas themselves, and how they handle their own captivity. They seem untroubled by it. They seem utterly indifferent about the condition of their wounds, and how long they'll be forced to remain in prison. They sing. They pray. But then the most astounding thing happens: an earthquake shakes the very foundation of the prison, providing an opening for all of the prisoners to escape, to achieve what might be considered freedom.

Pause on the earthquake for a moment. That has a particular resonance for our moment, for it can be understood as the opportunism that arises within a crisis. The earth shakes, and with that trembling comes a set of possibilities that may or may not be advisable to actualize. Not every opening, not every pathway toward release, leads to freedom. In fact, some openings that seem to promise freedom are actually the pathway to ever greater limitation, to a fierce and all-consuming determinism. Paul and Silas know that truth, and so they stay put.

That moment is illustrative of the contradictions we're facing right now. One of the greatest gifts, but also one of the most severe liabilities, we in the United States face has to do with our understanding of freedom. For many people, freedom simply means being able to do what they want when they want, which usually has to do with gratifying a fairly limited set of interests. By and large, I have to admit that when I encounter those who wish to do what they want when they want, it's usually a desire to engage in a fairly conventional set of activities – the right to go shopping or to drink in bars or to go on vacation or yes, to go back to church right away. In other words, the freedom expressed in individual liberties is usually not especially free – it's quite circumscribed, almost deterministic, in its predictability. Not only that, but that sort of freedom is usually pretty dull. That's the paradox at the root of self-expression and self-interest: whenever we just “try to be me,” we usually wind up sounding, and behaving, just like everyone else. The moment we strive hardest to be individuals in all of our singularity is the very moment we become automatons, what some thinkers in the 20th century called “the mass man and woman.”

The irony is that quite often, it's by accepting the limitations imposed by circumstances that we achieve a far more significant freedom. That's the pathway that Paul and Silas choose, and it's more difficult by far. It has little to do with individual liberty, with the right to do what they want when they want. Had they been after that, they could have walked out of the prison whenever they chose. That freedom, Paul and Silas realize, is superficial and shallow. They understand, as Jesus did before them, that true freedom is bound by a sense of responsibility toward others. They understand that the deepest freedom isn't freedom from – a prison, say, or the oppressive Romans – but freedom for – the love of one's neighbor, say, or the pursuit of dignity for all people, which is what landed them in prison in the first place. Paul and Silas understand that you can do what you want but still be in submission to a fierce determinism. But they also know that the reverse is true: though your individual liberty might be circumscribed, that's no measure of your freedom. Because actually, one's true individuality, one's true freedom, might only be discovered by constraining one's impulses toward immediate gratification of this or that liberty.

Albert Woodfox testifies to that kind of freedom in his recent memoir, entitled *Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in Solitary Confinement*. It makes for a powerful read while undergoing quarantine, a reminder of that whatever we're going through is as nothing compared to the treatment of those in prison, and especially solitary confinement. Woodfox was in and out of prison as a young man, arrested for petty crimes while living on the street. It was in prison that he discovered his freedom. It was there that he began to read, devouring everything he could lay his hands on. And it was there that he was introduced to some members of the Black Panthers, a group that is to this day widely maligned and even more widely misunderstood. Those two resources – literature and the Panthers - gave Woodfox a code by which to live, one that afforded him a sense of dignity that he had not previously known. But it also led a corrupt prison administration to frame him and several friends for a murder they did not commit. As the title makes plain, Woodfox spends more than forty years in solitary confinement, and he goes to extraordinary lengths to preserve his humanity during that time. Throughout the course of those decades, Woodfox appeals his case, and at several moments he is given the opportunity to be released. But he declines that opportunity, once because it involved a plea that would have left his co-defendants, also wrongly accused, stranded in prison, and once because he would have had to lie about his innocence. In both cases, Woodfox resists one form of freedom, a narrow self-interest that would have afforded him sweet release, in favor of another freedom, which prioritized the needs of his friends, while also insisting on principles of truth, justice, and broader human rights. Taking the plea would have let a corrupt justice system off the hook, which would have had consequences for many others caught up in that system. Faced with an impossible choice, Albert Woodfox discovers a freedom that isn't defined by liberty alone.

It's the same freedom that Paul and Silas discover during their prison sojourn. It's a freedom that understands that there can be no freedom so long as it comes at another's expense. That's why they choose to remain where they are – to preserve and to protect the life of the jailer and his family. Theirs is a freedom born from empathy, from compassion, and from a deep commitment to truth. It's a freedom discovered deep down in the soul, in the place where the spirit dwells, a state that can be touched by external circumstances, but not determined by them. Albert Woodfox found that place. Mandela

found it. MLK found it, as did many other prisoners of conscience. Access to that place within the soul is what allowed the Apostle Paul to write that he had learned the secret of contentment whether in plenty or want, whether being well fed or hungry. It's what allowed him to write so eloquently to the Galatian church about the freedom of a Christian, which is found in service to others, and in loving others as yourself. That freedom, true freedom, is discovered when we submit to one another in love.

We face a similar paradox right now. At the very core of US arguments about health care, or a fair wage, or income inequality lies this very tension within the experience of freedom, which is that we become most free when we actually take on and bear one another's burdens. But that's also the tension at the heart of the tug of war we're experiencing over when and how to end quarantine. Insisting on individual rights and liberties winds up exposing individuals to extreme risks, including death. Meanwhile, forms of collective organization, what some see as the loss of individual liberty, actually allow human beings to achieve the kind of freedom we most desire – not simply to do what we want when we want, but to maintain flourishing lives: to remain healthy, to have enough time to pursue interests of our own choosing, to become better educated, and to reduce whatever worries we have about accessing basic necessities like food, or clothing, or shelter. By restraining our liberties in one way, we actually achieve a far greater form of freedom.

That has implications for our individual lives, and how we conduct ourselves during and after this long sojourn through Covid-19. But on Memorial Day Weekend, we might also consider the implications for the United States as a whole. In a moment in which the US has abdicated any sort of global leadership, when much of the world has looked upon the US not with admiration but with pity,² and when a much cited article in *The Atlantic* has argued that we're living in a failed state,³ we need to recall now more than ever the deeper principles of freedom discovered by Paul and Silas in that prison cell, principles well understood by those who have sacrificed themselves for democracy. True freedom isn't merely about self-interest. It has to do with being bound to, with submitting to, principles deeper than individual liberty, which can be expressed as empathy and care, as compassion and generosity, especially toward those rendered most vulnerable by the circumstances of life.

I read recently that Germany and France, not usually known for close cooperation, were joining together to insure that weaker members of the EU, as well as those hit hardest by the coronavirus, would have access to financial relief that would stabilize their economies.⁴ It's the kind of initiative the US might have led in an earlier era. Imagine if, in the midst of this crisis, the US and Canada, and perhaps Mexico as well, joined together to provide substantial relief to other parts of the Americas, like Honduras or Guatemala, like El Salvador or Nicaragua. Imagine how that would relieve the pressures within those other countries, while also relieving pressures within our own society.

² See Timothy Egan, "The World is Taking Pity on Us," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/opinion/coronavirus-trump.html>

³ See George Packer, "We Are Living in a Failed State," *The Atlantic*, June 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/underlying-conditions/610261/>

⁴ See Steven Erlanger, "One Crisis Too Many," *The New York Times*, May 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/19/world/europe/coronavirus-germany-merkel-france.html?searchResultPosition=6>

Achieving such a vision in our current political climate feels more than a little unlikely, I know. But it's not like it can't be done. It *is* being done – just not by us.

Perhaps now is the time to rediscover such visions. Perhaps Memorial Day, to say nothing of Covid-19, might be the occasion to recall the more robust form of freedom that Paul and Silas discovered in their prison cell, that Albert Woodfox discovered in his, and that we too might discover in our own version of lockdown. That freedom is available to us all, if we can but realize it. That freedom – not from, but for – is something you already know about. You know how to live it out. It's a vision, an ethic, that we need to do our part to spread and to model. Perhaps that's our real Challenge during the time of Corona.

But let me return to the Challenges that many of us are engaging this weekend. I hope you push yourself mightily. I hope you're reminded of just how strong you are. I hope it brings the rush of a sweet release when it finally does conclude. And I hope it symbolizes the far greater challenges and responsibilities afforded to us as we pursue the deeper freedom modeled by Paul and Silas.

Wherever you are, whatever you're going through, I hope you know how much you're loved – by me, but by everyone in this community.

Love to you in this time of corona. I miss you. And I love you.