

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Seventh Sunday of Easter

20 May 2007

Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

It's true that in his high priestly prayer, just after he had prepared his disciples for his death and given them instruction as to how they should carry on without him, Jesus prayed to God that they might all be one, as he and God were one. But do you think he had the kind of oneness in mind that Paul carried out? Or stumbled upon? Or whatever it was that Paul was doing? Do you think Jesus could have envisioned or even hoped for that kind of oneness? It sure did make for a challenging collection of people, a messy hodge podge sort of assortment. Maybe if he'd defined the scope of their oneness a little more narrowly, it would have gone better for them. You know, there are just some sorts of people that don't mix well in a group. If you're lucky, they're the oil and vinegar type that simply don't mix; but more often than not, they're more of the oil and matchstick variety. You'd think that between them, Jesus and Paul would have known that. And known the practical limits of how much diversity can be wedged together in one place before everything explodes into pure chaos, like a jack in the box suddenly freed from its constraints or a well shaken can of Coke that has sat in the freezer too long.

First of all, before Paul ever arrived on the scene, Peter and Cornelius had simultaneously received visions that brought Jew and Gentile together into one community and around one table. And since our modern ears don't always appreciate the subtleties of these situations, let me say that for Jew and Gentile to belly up to the bar together was about as unlikely as Protestant and Catholic in Northern Ireland, or black, white and Afrikaner in South Africa, or Sunni and Shiite in Iraq. It simply wasn't done, and in truth, the wise avoided it at all cost.

But by the time we get to Acts 16, all of that has been going on for awhile. I wouldn't assume they'd grown chummy with each other, but for the most part they were resigned to the fact they were all sharing the same pew. Now Paul and Silas were out on the road on one of their missionary journeys, and had spent a few days in Philippi when they went out to a place of prayer on the Sabbath. They'd spent some time teaching the folks who were there about Jesus and his life, death and resurrection, when a woman named Lydia approached them. It was clear that she'd been listening carefully to what they were saying, that God was stirring things up in her heart, and in fact, she and her entire household had just walked into the waters of baptism. The first thing she wanted to do as a newly baptized Christian was open her home to these disciples, and offer them hospitality. Again, that may just sound neighborly and friendly to us, but to Paul and the early church it was unprecedented. Yes, Jews and Gentiles had gotten used to eating together and sitting beside each other in church. But maybe Jesus and his male friends had shown their willingness to talk with women in public. But going to the home of one of them and spending the night was quite another matter. Heads would turn and tongues would wag, you

could count on it. And even more significant than Paul accepting the overnight accommodations of a woman was the truth that she was a Gentile. They might have eaten together, but there is no indication that Paul has stayed with Gentiles before. For Lydia to extend this invitation was unprecedented; for Paul and Silas to accept was to push open the doors of Christ's church even wider than they had been up to now. Or as Paul would write later, truly there was now neither male nor female, neither Jew nor Gentile in Christ's church.

Another person they encountered in Philippi was a slave girl who trailed after them, pestering them, shouting out whether any one was listening or not that these men were slaves of the Most High God, come to preach a way of salvation. It's all well and good that she was telling the truth, but Paul found it profoundly annoying. He didn't have to have her on his heels and breathing down his neck for several days to know that the girl wasn't right, so he finally turned on her, or more accurately on the demons that had taken up residence in her soul, and he ordered them to come out of her and leave her alone – which they did. And the girl was healed – which sounds great to us. But her owners had enjoyed the profits of her fortunetelling, and weren't in any way favorably impressed by this turn of events. People then and now just don't take kindly to having their wallets fleeced, either by sleazy used car salesmen or by healers and truth tellers who are out to do works of mercy and justice. Profit is profit, and don't be messing with mine, thank you very much.

Her owners turned on Paul and Silas, dragged them into the marketplace and threw them in a heap at the feet of the authorities. They then hurled their accusations at the magistrates, accusations about nationalism and anti-Semitism; these men aren't from around here, and they aren't one of us, and, then they snarled out the truth that they were Jews. Then they threw in a little old time religion and protested that they don't do things the way we do, and they encourage customs that just aren't right. So Paul and Silas were then severely beaten with rods and thrown into prison, where they were securely detained. They were led to the darkest, innermost cell in the joint, their feet put in stocks, the door locked, a jailer set down in his place to guard the door and make sure that the disturbances were over and done once and for all.

About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. About the time any of the rest of us would have been feeling our wounds and wailing about the state of our pathetic affairs, these two were singing and praying and telling the other prisoners about the good and gracious God that they were serving. Suddenly there was an earthquake, their chains fell off their ankles and wrists and into a heap on the floor, and the door of their cell swung open. The jailer woke up and realized what had happened and was about to take his own life rather than have to answer to the angry, ruthless authorities for having let the prisoners escape – when Paul called out to him. First they were singing and praising God while they were chained to the walls of a damp and dark cell, and now that they're free to head for the hills, Paul calls out to the jailer and assures him that they haven't gone anywhere. To which the jailer responds by calling for lights, and then rushes in to fall at Paul's feet and asks what he needs to do to be saved. Paul told him the good news about Jesus, and then the jailer took them home with him. Home to the place where he washed their wounds and offered them food, while he and his entire household were baptized and welcomed into the family of God.

Welcomed into the family of God. A rich Gentile woman who opened her heart to God and her home to his disciples, a sick and tormented slave girl who spoke the truth while being under attack by demons, and the very jailer who had locked up Christ's disciples and then thrown away the key. That's some family, with no small amount of challenge as to how they're going to pretend to get along. We know it can be a challenge for us, and all we have to contend with is new comer and long-standing tradition holder, white collar and blue collar, Republican and Democrat, dignified and highly respected wise elder and free spirited, if not rambunctious teenager, life long Congregationalist and former Catholic and unsure explorer of unknown faith, well-spoken and soft spoken and stutterer and altogether silent, free spending dreamer and restrained and cautious realist, seeker of quieter and whirlwind of exuberance. It's not easy being a part of this family of God, finding a unity in the midst of all that diversity, a melody at the heart of all our harmony. A harmony that is sometimes sweet and soothing, sometimes discordant and brash, but one family, none the less. Born of God, leading back to God, dedicated to God, blessed by God.

Let me close with a poem by Kate Compston, entitled "Give us hearts of flesh"

Face to face we sit –
the silence, like a stone wall,
separating us.

It is not enough
to sit in proximity
if we have no trust.

Give us hearts of flesh
to grieve our hostility:
then grant us laughter

and let us reach out.
Even if we do not see
eye to eye clearly

dare us open up
our hands, be hospitable:
bare us, soul to soul.

(Resources for Preaching and Worship Year C, page 168)