

Slaves All

Acts 16:16-34 Revelation 22:12-14,16-17,20-21 John 17:20-26 Psalm 97

There's an old saying about worship: it's not whether we human beings **will** worship, it's only a question to **what or who** we worship.

Just so, it's not whether we shall **be** a slave, but rather — to what, or to whom **shall we be** enslaved?

I know that may rub many independent-minded 21st century folks the wrong way: after all, aren't I entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?

Aren't I the master of my own soul, captain of my own ship, yada, yada, yada????

You don't have to look hard to see that's nice talk, and that it's baloney.

Frankly, our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles gets us right to where we're going this morning.

Everyone in this story is a slave: from the literal slave girl who's good with tarot cards, to her owners who are slaves to the money she makes for them, to the mob who's enslaved to the economic system so that anyone who threatens it is set upon, to the jailer enslaved by the rules and expectations of his job, to Paul and Silas, slaves of almighty God.

Yet, truth be told, most folks don't see themselves as slaves, and with the exception of the actual slave girl and Paul and Silas, I don't think the others in this story see themselves as slaves — at least not till something opens their eyes to the truth of their situation....

And the one thing in life that most often opens our eyes to our slavery is pain.

Pain can be sought out, as Fr. Dan Berrigan, a loyal slave of Almighty God, did during a lifetime of peace activism involving years of anti-war and anti-nuclear non-violent actions.

Fr. Dan died last week.

Or it can be pain of a kind that brought a young man to my office last week, who was suffering from years of dental pain, which, for anyone who's had an abscess or gum work or other dental issues knows — can be the worst physical pain around.

Or it can be the pain that comes when we lose our loved one to death, as Auntie Lani and her family know so well; as the family of Matariki, a young Tahitian boy, my kids' cousin, who drowned last week, know so well.

And pain can take us to many places, as all of you moms here know all too well.

Pain can take some into addiction and others into despair...

But pain, even when it takes us through the valleys of addiction and despair, can also be the long and winding road that takes us to places of salvation.

For Fr. Dan, that pain led to a lifetime of witness to the gospel of peace and justice, that saw him spend many years in jail for saying "no" to the powers of death and carnage.

For the fellow with that dental agony, he realized that his whole life growing up, he never knew pain; he got whatever he wanted.

He's grateful that the pain he now endures creates a deep compassion for others who are also suffering, whether from disease or poverty or isolation.

For those whose loved ones have died, with time, many begin to sense their presence, to feel their love, to hope in the reunion promised to us all.

When we begin to see that whatever pain comes our way might actually be "a refining fire that is the mercy of God," we begin to get a little closer to what Paul is saying to us today.

Here's Paul, beaten with rods, shackled, plopped down in the very center of the dungeon, it's midnight, the darkest hour of the night...and what are he and Silas up to but singing Swing Low Sweet Chariot and Amazing Grace!

In the very midst of pain and isolation and abandonment Paul gets what is at the very heart of our faith.

It's a faith that sounds crazy to most people, because it asks us to trust that in the suffering and death of Jesus, we are all home free, that we don't save ourselves, that God, through Jesus, has already done it, once and forever.

Here's the thing: most folks think of Christianity as a day at the beach when the surf gets rough.

The life guard, we'll call him Jesus, yells at everyone to get out so they can be safe.

Lots of folks listen and are laying around the beach when suddenly a young boy yells out that a girl is still in the ocean, and she's in trouble.

The lifeguard races out into the ocean, grabs the little girl, who has stopped breathing, CPR is performed, and she survives.

Everyone is pleased, thanks Jesus for his heroic rescue operation, and then, folks get back to their picnics and games.

Some will say how stupid the girl was to be in the water in the first place, others will commend the rescue, and others will chalk it up to an interesting day at the beach. Bob Capon, Parables, 40.

That is the common view of our faith: People in trouble are rescued while the rest of us look on, throw some judgment around and chalk it all up to a good day when the rescue succeeds.

That's not Christianity -- but this is:

Using the same story line, we still have Jesus the lifeguard warning everyone to get out of the rough surf.

We still have the boy hollering about the floundering girl.

But this time, when the lifeguard goes out to save the little girl, they both drown.

When the people go back to the lifeguard tower, they find a note from the lifeguard saying: "The little girl is safe in my death."

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

These are the words we say at every funeral: that you know.

But what we sometimes forget is that we say words very close to these at every baptism.

At every baptism, we acknowledge that we are baptized into the death of Jesus.

Think about that for a minute.

If you're baptized, you're dead.

Now, today, dead as a door knob.

Now what, I ask you, do the dead need with one-ups-man-ship?

What do the dead need to worry about?

Who do the dead need to outshine or out-maneuver?

Meaning that, for Christians, Jesus, in his death and resurrection and ascension, has already done all the heavy lifting.

The kingdom is coming not in the unknown future, it's already here.

This past Thursday, the feast of the Ascension, means precisely this: when Jesus ascends, he takes the whole world with him! Capon, id.

When the frightened jailer yells out to Paul "what must I do to be saved?", Paul's response of "believe on Jesus" is not some flimsy piece of religious gobbledygook ... but on it hangs the entire weight of our faith: we don't save ourselves, Jesus does.

And because I don't save myself, I don't need to be right; I don't need to fix or judge other people; I don't need to hate or go to war — because all of that is about me saving me.....

But Paul says: "trust that Jesus is saving us and line up your puny but sacred life with the most profound story line of the universe."

That our salvation is in the King who dies, rises, and disappears, and who asks us simply to trust his promise that, in him, we have the kingdom already, in him, we are already home free, now, today, and forever, because we are already one with him, as he is one with the Father, **and in our slavery to this truth, we are, at long last, finally free.** Capon, id., paraphrased.

What enslaves you today?

Is it a job or that insatiable need to be entertained or to be right or is it porn or financial insecurity or old hurts?

Believe on Jesus, my friends — and be set free.

+amen

