

"Liberating Love"
(Acts 16: 16-34)
May 29, 2022

"Who wouldn't want to be free from captivity or bondage?" You'll be surprised by the answers you get. It all depends on how one has gone through one's social conditioning. Social conditioning. What does it mean? When the wildlife protection officer captured an injured wild eagle and tried to save its life, do you know what he must do first? He must take precautions to prevent building a personal relationship with the eagle during the healing process. If not, the chance of the eagle's survival once it's recovered and released would be significantly reduced.

Whatever outlook we bear towards life, beliefs, relationships, and choices, they all carry the traits of influence within family, school, peer group, and society since childhood. Parents are supposed to provide a safe environment for their kids. Teachers create a safe learning environment for their students, while peers support each other, especially when facing challenges. All the members help maintain the stability and growth of the society they belong to. If everyone is doing what everyone is supposed to do, the living, learning, and social environment for everyone will become better and better. All will enjoy the freedom of movement, freedom of belief, freedom to express oneself, freedom to choose one's state in life, etc. However, where is that place where we all can enjoy all that has just been mentioned? That place is sometimes called 'Utopia,' which means literally "no place," a location that doesn't exist.

Why would this happen if parents, teachers, peer groups, and societies all do what they are supposed to do? I'll raise two questions at this point. The first

question is, "Do they all do the jobs they are supposed to do?" The second question is, "Are their jobs always beneficial to the development of the individuals?"

"These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Maybe the slave girl was delivering the truth. "The Most High God" was a convenient common denominator for the supreme being, and "salvation" was sought eagerly by both Gentiles and Jews. However, the frequency and how she delivered the message was annoying. She followed Paul and Silas day by day through the streets of Philippi and cried it out loud along the way, which somehow reminded me of how my mom nagged me. It was possibly the most effective way when she ran the business with her owners, and my mom did hers. She made a lot of noise, delivered powerful messages, and brought her owners a lot of money. Her owners might have reinforced what she did with incentives. But this created a big contrast compared to Lydia, who turned her heart quietly to the Lord. What Jesus wanted was not to draw people's attention through the satisfaction of sensual needs, extraordinary performances, or guarantee of success. Paul has gone through both before and after his conversion. It seems that he preferred the quieter way, which might explain why he exorcised the spirit that possessed her. Paul liberated himself when he liberated the slave girl.

Did the liberation make all parties happy? No! The camera turned from the slave girl to her owners immediately. The owners became very unhappy because their hope of making money was gone. They were used to seeing her possessed by a spirit of divination; she kept earning money for them through fortune-telling, possibly by annoying the customers as she did with Paul and Silas. They benefited from the inconvenience, injustice, inequality, and inequity inflicted on others. Once the conditions were rectified, however, the person who was key to the whole operation faded out from the scene. Nobody cared for the well-being of the slave-

girl but the damages. The owners dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities, the magistrates. The reasons for the complaint were that Paul and Silas were not Romans. They brought their foreign customs into the Roman society and challenged the status quo treasured by all. We can call this xenophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism and assume that all would go against them. But that didn't happen. Instead, the crowd joined in attacking Paul and Silas. The magistrates didn't check if the complaints were valid or not and punished them. They didn't know that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens which would nullify all the charges against them.

It is not difficult to manipulate the emotion of a crowd, especially when the crowd exposes its soft spots. When the number of aged people in the population keeps increasing, the cost of pain medication and pain management will draw the attention of the politicians to address the needs of that sector of the people quickly. When the number of people having emotional and psychological issues keeps growing, drug dependence will soon become a severe problem. When the number of people aware of their spiritual emptiness keeps escalating, activities to fill in the spiritual space will surge upward. In today's scripture, the control was in the hands of the owners through divination and fortune-telling of the slave girl. In our daily life, it is through the medical health system, pharmaceutical companies, LCBO, beer stores, religious cults, sports, video games, pornography, strip clubs, and others.

How would we feel if we could be free from these controls? Nobody knows since we have never been free. We might feel it's easy to free ourselves since it doesn't look too difficult to get out of one. However, we soon find ourselves falling into another easily. We are living in the same society, and we are supporting it by agreeing with the policies it sets. However, policies have their limitations. It's easy

to fall through the cracks between systems. For example, do you know if Ontario Work (OW) and Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) are indexed to inflation? We are worried about the coming inflation, so we stress more what we should do is teach people how to fish instead of feeding them. However, do we know that some can't even afford a fishing rod or a fishing line with a hook?

Recently, I heard a conversation between two persons about jobs created in Ontario. One was very excited with the figures since the employment gains continued, and the unemployment fell to a record low. And the other person approvingly said, "The figures are surely right ... I took three of the created jobs recently." How much do we know about the stress of doing three jobs to support the family? The figures look good. Should someone care about the underlying problems?

It's sad to know that we are only an insignificant component of society. Sometimes we are the solution, sometimes we are the problems, and sometimes we are both. As the slave girl, she is not under the radar once she is liberated. Did she become a free person, released by her owners? Did her owners sell her to someone else? Or did her owners treat her well since she brought them a great fortune? The scripture didn't say.

What the scripture did say, however, was that Paul and Silas were put into jail, the innermost one, to make sure that they couldn't escape. To a lot of people, that's devastating. But, surprisingly, Paul and Silas didn't feel that way. They knew what they had got into. They knew what the Romans were thinking, the boundaries they crossed, and the 'benefit' and 'loss' they caused. They also knew that their mission put their lives at risk. However, compared to the love they could share through the words and deeds of liberation, they felt peace and joy even when they were in difficult situations.

As we can see, the experience of Paul and Silas, being peaceful and joyful in the innermost cell, is contagious. “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” It resonated in the jailer's heart, who thought of ending his life because of uncertainty in his job. Unable to fulfill one's duty diminishes one's human worth. That happened to the slave girl and the jailer, and to many of us. Must life be seen like that, though?