

Theme: The right person for the job

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you sent Saul of Tarsus to spread the good news of your son to the known world: may we honor his work by applying our faith to our work, with the help of your Holy Spirit and your son, Jesus Christ, through whom we pray. Amen.

On this Seventh Sunday of Easter, we are in a liturgical and spiritual void. Jesus ascended into heaven on Thursday and we, like the disciples, are left to fend for ourselves. Jesus is gone and we have to wait another week for the Holy Spirit.

Now someone might ask what about God the Father? Or, why is this time any different from the time before that first Christmas when Jesus entered the world or when Jesus was baptized? I have no good answer.

The only answer I have is that we are spoiled. We have grown accustomed to having God close to us. We don't need to sacrifice in Jerusalem to have God near by. So, we sit around and wait for Jesus' promise of the Spirit. And when the Holy Spirit comes, that will be a bigger (ahem) deal than the passing of health care legislation.

We also pray that God is present in the work of committees who call clergy to their congregations. It is difficult and stressful work. Finding just the right person is hard work.

For example: There are various versions of this story, including one published in the Dear Abby column. In this version, a church committee considered applications for a new minister.

They came across a résumé which listed the applicant's many successes, but that also acknowledged a few potentially negative qualities:

- * disbarred from his association of professional lawyers
- * subject to violent and unpredictable headaches, sometimes characterized by flashing lights and imaginary voices
- * survived five plots against his life
- * spent 14 years living with no registered address

- * had difficulty getting along with religious leaders
- * arrested on trumped-up charges, tried in five separate courts, pursued his appeal to the highest court
- * imprisoned more than four years in various jails
- * never stayed at any church for more than three years.

“Well,” declared the committee unanimously, “we certainly wouldn’t want that kind of troublemaker in our church!”

“By the way,” asked one curious member, “who was that from?” The secretary retrieved the application from the wastebasket. “Someone called Saul of Tarsus,” he said. “Wait, there’s a P.S. under the signature -- ‘You may know me better as St. Paul.’”

St. Paul had a knack of having trouble find him. He and Silas end up in prison, again. Well, just how did they get into prison in the first place? How was it that the government thought it was right to torture them? The trouble all began with a slave girl. Slave girls are *trouble*.

This particular slave girl was a fortune teller. She would follow St. Paul and his companions around shouting about how they were slaves, too – slaves of the Most High God, about how they have a plan for our salvation. She wouldn’t let up! This was going on for days! I just hate it when slave girls follow me around like that. Only Paul did something I never did – he did something about it. He ordered the fortune-telling spirit out of the girl.

Well that was supposed to take care of that. Only it was the beginning of bigger trouble. Acting out of annoyance instead of compassion, the girl who is no longer useful to her owners is liberated. The girl’s owners, though, were put out of business. They were angry that their livelihood was taken away from them.

They had Paul and Silas arrested on the charge of advocating Jewish customs that are unlawful for Romans to do. They got the crowd worked up against Paul and Silas. The Philippi officials had them tortured. They were put in stocks at the end of the prison.

Paul and Silas were in a dark, dank prison. They were in a jail cell and they were fastened in stocks. Their muscles were likely cramping. They were

thirsty. They were hungry. Their bodies ached from the beatings they received. They probably needed medical care.

So, how did they respond to this dark predicament? They started singing hymns and songs. They were praising God! They were expressing joy! Were they high or what? Yeah, they were high – high on the love of God. The other prisoners were their audience.

Then, all of a sudden, a strong earthquake happened. So strong, the doors of all the cells were opened. Even their chains dropped from the hands and legs. The quake woke up the jailer. When he saw the cell doors open, he knew it was over for him. His life, as he knew it, was over. He decided to take the easy way out. He was going to kill himself.

But Paul shouted and stopped him by saying that everyone is still in jail. Now, do you really think that would happen today, that the prisoners would stay put? Maybe the biggest miracle in this story is that the freed prisoners didn't leave.

Even the jailer didn't believe Paul. He grabbed a torch to see for himself. Sure enough, everyone stayed put. The jailer had a sense that something special happened there, that the hand of God was present in that place. So overcome with this realization, he brought his shaking body, kneeling, before Paul and Silas. He asked what he must do to be saved.

They told him to have faith in Jesus and that goes for his household, too. The jailer took them to his house, where they told his household about Jesus. They remained outside, in the dark. The jailer offered them hospitality and dressed their wounds. We don't know if the other prisoners stayed or took off.

After hearing about Jesus, they couldn't even wait for dawn. Everyone in the household were baptized. No need to find a lake or river. Just get some water and get 'er done. After the baptism, Paul and Silas were invited into the home. They left the darkness of their lives and entered the light of their house, bringing Paul and Silas with them. There and then they broke bread together.

Jesus inaugurated his ministry by declaring freedom to the captive. Paul later writes to the Corinthians, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” (2 Corinthians 3:17) The work of the Spirit brings freedom to the captive.

Work is important in Acts. A slave girl is freed from control by her owners. A jailer is freed from shame to hear the good news of Jesus and be baptized. The violence and confinement in the first part of this story is replaced by freedom, hospitality, and faith.

The work, worship, and witness by faithful people brings freedom to all who believe. What we do and how we do it counts. Even after retirement we work. The work is only different. We work for pay and we work without financial compensation. But, we all work. The core of our work, whatever our work is, is faith.

We now pray: Gracious God and giver of all good gifts, we give you thanks for the gift of work: through work we receive meaning in our lives, effecting the lives of those around us; may we always be mindful of your presence in our work, no matter what that work may be, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Text: **Acts 16:16–34** (NRSV)

¹⁶ One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you^d a way of salvation.” ¹⁸ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹ But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the

^d Other ancient authorities read *to us*

foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.²⁷ When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."²⁹ The jailer^e called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."³² They spoke the word of the Lord^f to him and to all who were in his house.³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay.³⁴ He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.¹

^e Gk *He*

^f Other ancient authorities read *word of God*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ac 16:16–34). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.