***(Take a moment silence to remember the 17 victims and their families in the shooting incident that occurred in a high school in Parkland, Florida this week. Pray that we would join with other groups in reducing guns and gun violence in America.)***

**February 18, 2018**

**I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free**

Acts 16:16-29

**Introduction to Text**

 This passage from the *Book of Acts* is seen as Paul's second missionary journey through Asia Minor and Macedonia. After spending some time in Macedonia, Paul and Silas go searching for a place to pray and they find such a place outside the city gates down by a river and they speak and pray with the women gathered there. This is where they meet a wealthy woman named, Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, a woman of means who invites the apostles to spend the night with her in her home. And after Lydia, they meet this woman.

**Read Acts 16:16-29**

**Further Thoughts:**

 The title of my sermon today comes from Nina Simone's song, *I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Free.* And I believe Simone's sentiment and lyrics sum up many of the insights I gained from studying this unusual story from *The Book of Acts*. Here's the third verse:

*I wish I could break all the chains holding me*

*I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That everyone should be free*

To me,this song from the Civil Rights era is about longing for emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and literal freedom for all God's people, but at the same time, it acknowledges that we are not free, not quite yet.

**Sermon**

Unlike Lydia (the woman in previous verses), a woman who owns her own home, deals in expensive purple cloths, and has the ability to host travelers in her home overnight, this next woman has no name or identity. She is only referred to as "slave girl." And in contrast to Lydia, she is depicted as doubly possessed: she is possessed by "a spirit of divination" (**Gk.** here is *Puthon*, which is the root of python; so she is possessed by a *snake spirit)* and she is possessed by her owners who upon seeing that this stream of income has been cut off, become irate and demand that Paul and Silas be thrown into prison. She may be free from an evil spirit, but regardless, money talks. (And she is still owned by her masters)

 Even more curious in this story is when this doubly possessed slave girl calls out to the Apostles and anyone who will listen: "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation. .." and she keeps doggedly pursuing the Apostles and saying this for several days until, out of annoyance or worn down by her cries, Paul says to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And the spirit leaves her. But what was the problem?

 She wasn't telling a lie and she seems to understand the Apostle's purpose and mission better than anyone else on the street. If someone understands our purpose, complements us, praises our efforts; he or she pats us on the back for our hard work and ethical behavior; our bravery for bringing about God's reign of love on this earth--what's wrong with that?

 ***Why would you cast out a spirit who is so impressed by what you're doing?***

 The man who sat across from me in the restaurant had attended worship the Sunday before. He was a first time visitor and, subsequently, that next week, he called the office and set a time to meet with me over lunch.

 "Here, take this," he said to me, leaning across the table and handing me a crisp one hundred dollar bill. Then the man proceeded to shower me with praise. He told me how great a preacher I was. He smiled and laughed recalling something I said in my sermon. And then he told me how he would soon be a pledger and faithful attendee of worship, but he had a few more questions to ask me and that's when the conversation suddenly changed. He asked if I thought Martin Luther King Jr. was a false prophet and overrated. He probed me about my feelings around the subject of race-- blacks, Asians, Hispanics, etc. Soon that $100.00 bill in my pocket felt dirty and infected, like an open wound. I had never sat down to lunch with a racist and one who enjoyed my preaching so much and then I wondered what I had said from the pulpit the week before to inspire him so.

 As our lunch continued and he asked questions, a sick feeling came over me. I felt like Judas must have felt during the Last Supper when Jesus turned to his friends and companions and said, *"Truly, I tell you one of you will betray me."*

 Now, I wish I could say I handed back that one hundred dollar bill, and in my mind, I have gone back to that lunch and imagined throwing the bill back in his face and walking out of the restaurant . . . but I took the money. When I returned to the church office, I remember holding this bill out like a dead rat and saying to my office manager, "Please take this. Put it in the deacons' fund, burn it, put it anywhere. I don't want it." I never saw the man again. I was so naive.

 If only the cartoonist and creator of *Dennis the Menace*, Hank Ketcham had been sitting beside me that day at my lunch with this man and whispering in my ear: *"Remember Ken, flattery is like chewing gum. Enjoy it, but don't swallow it."*

 I had swallowed...and it is still stuck in my throat.

 Willie James Jennings, theologian, professor at Yale Divinity School, and author of a commentary on Acts, writes this:

 There is a danger here that the words of the slave girl, her affirmations and proclamations of ministry, will be seen as good news. It is not. It is the tortured speech of the enslaved masquerading as gospel word. These enslaved and enslaving words can become intoxicating, even addicting, to the disciples of Jesus, especially when disciples seek affirmation and acceptance above everything else."

 In other words, ***if*** the disciples choose to accept the slave girl's affirmations and proclamations, according to Jennings, they become complicit in shoring up the very system of oppression and enslavement that God desires to take apart; if they chew this gum and swallow it, she stays where she is--in chains.

 We, **The Church**, have to be careful about patting ourselves on our backs for the good works we do on behalf of God and the good sermons we deliver while at the same time so easily accepting the divisions we have created and bless.

 We're tempted to say that's the way things are, have been, and always will be. We acquiesce to the belief that things will never change. We say let them sing their song and we will sing ours. You stay over there on your side of the table and I’ll stay over here and so both sides remain possessed by a spirit of slavery.

 We are enslaved by our divisions.

 For a moment, think about the lines we all draw within ourselves and around us and between people--those lines that separate us from others, the lines that divide our souls, divide families, divide communities, divide this country.

 We draw lines and we've become experts at maintaining them.

 We have property lines, lines in the sand, the line between faith and science and the line between north and south, east and west and we have convinced ourselves that some lines should never be crossed.

 We have lines that keep someone out and lines that keep someone in.

 We've grown up drawing lines; lines make us feel safe and secure.

 Lines tell us where we are in relation to something or someone else.

 Lines keep order and chaos from breaking out, we tell ourselves.

 Lines in war, lines in peace, lines between neighbors.

 There are lines in this story from Acts: lines between enslaved and free, between the possessed and the possessor, between rich and poor, between the religious and the irreligious, but, this past week, I had a wake-up call about these lines we so carefully imagine and draw.

 I was driving my Honda down Old Lynchburg Road staying in my lane, driving between the lines, keeping on my side of the road when suddenly a deer raced out of the brush, out of nowhere, and smashed into the front bumper of my car.

 Where were the lines?

 I had stayed within mine, but, clearly, this deer had not. And I'm finding out in Virginia (like in Oregon) deer do not care about lines. Indeed, when I took my car into Brown's Collision Center on Friday, some very nice person informed me that deer-car-collisions in Virginia are on the rise this year and that they are seeing approximately 16 deer collisions per week.

 Be careful driving home from church today. Because mother earth and her creatures don't care about the lines we draw across this land. And how does God see and understand the lines we draw?

 About midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. And suddenly, there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken and all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened."

 (Acts 16:25-26)

 I wonder.

 What was their song? What were Paul and Silas singing about? What song could possibly shake the foundations of a prison, erase lines, and bring a jailer to his knees? And what is that song that liberates both the possessed and the possessor and sets him or her free to love God and neighbor? Perhaps, the Apostles were singing an old Nina Simone song from 1967. (I encourage you to listen to this song after reading this sermon.)

*I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every person, every child of God, should be free.*

*Amen? Amen.*