



"The Costs & Benefits of Freedom"

*The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California*

*Seventh Sunday after Easter 2010  
May 16, 2010  
Acts 16:16–34 (CEV)*

My good friend, the Rev. Ann B. Day, the recently retired founding coordinator of the United Church of Christ's "Open & Affirming" program, shared the following story from her childhood with several of us at a national church gathering years ago.

Ann said that when she was about 5 years old she attended a family reunion with her parents. After lunch, the older generation was busy visiting after dinner and wasn't paying much attention to her, and she became impatient and started to distract the adults from their conversation.

Someone at the table asked what was wrong with Ann. Her mother picked her up, sat her on her lap, and said, "I think she has ancestors."

I never knew Ann's mother, Leona B. Carpenter, but this story has led me to believe that Ann got her sense of humor and dry wit from her mother.

Rather than saying, "Ann has ants in her pants," which is something that my mother would have said, Leona said dryly, "She has ancestors." By that statement Leona meant that Ann came from a long line of people who had agitated for change, and that she was one in that number.

At the age of five, Ann was demanding that children be offered an alternative to hands-folded-in-the-lap visiting at family reunions. This summer, some fifty years later, Ann will be recognized for her role in agitating for the inclusion of lesbian and gay persons into the full life and leadership of the church as a co-founder of the UCC Open and Affirming program 25 years ago. Ann is one in a long line of Christian leaders who has agitated for freedom, liberation, and justice for all—particularly within the UCC.

Ann's mother was correct. Ann had ancestors. And, as it turns out, we do, too. We members of the UCC have ancestors who have shown us how to agitate for freedom, liberation, and justice for all. We have ancestors—lots of ancestors—many of whom most of us barely know anything about.

But what if we did? What if we knew more about our ancestors? And what if we became the ancestors that our progeny would look to as examples of freedom fighters, liberation leaders, and justice seekers for all?

## II

Today's scripture reading from the Acts of the Apostles is a reminder that every one of us in this room has ancestors. We have ancestors who have taught us that freedom and liberation are gifts from God, and that God has called us to enjoy these gifts and to do our part to see that these gifts are extended to the whole people of God.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we see several examples of the apostles' involvement in freedom and liberation movements of all sorts. Some people needed freeing and liberating from the institution of slavery. Some needed freeing and liberating from allegiances to the principalities and powers that promoted Caesar's rule over God's reign. And some needed freeing and liberating from ideologies and theologies that kept them bound and chained to world views and belief systems that did not express the love and grace of God.

In today's reading, the Apostles Paul and Silas exorcised a demon from a slave woman which ultimately resulted in her freedom from bondage. She became an apostle herself, and encouraged others to join the Christian movement.

Of course, not everyone was pleased that the woman was liberated from her demon, which is another way of saying that not everyone was pleased that she was freed from slavery. Her owners saw Paul and Silas as meddling in their business and damaging their livelihood, and so did the other slave owners and Roman authorities who were benefiting from the labor of slaves. So it is no surprise that a kind of mob rule broke out, and that Paul and Silas were beaten, whipped, and thrown in jail after they liberated that slave woman.

Despite their rough treatment, Paul and Silas were not deterred. They prayed and sang all night long while the other prisoners listened. In the midst of their praying and singing, Luke says, an earthquake shook the jail, so that the doors opened, and the chains fell from the prisoners. Paul and Silas could have escaped, but they didn't.

When the jailor awoke from his concussion and saw that the prison doors had been opened, he nearly ended his own life for fear of the retribution he would face from his superiors for losing his prisoners. But before he took action against himself, Paul shouted from the bowels of the prison and explained that he and Silas were still in the jail. They had not run for their lives. They had stayed in the jail, and saved his life.

The jailor got a torch, went into the prison, and found the apostles right where he left them. Then the jailor led the apostles out of the prison and asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

In this passage, Paul and Silas freed the woman from slavery. They upset the social and economic order that depended upon the institution of slavery, and the prison industry that supported it, and they led the slave woman and the jailor from their own proverbial “Egypt” to a new kind of Promised Land.

To be sure, the slave woman and the jailor had ancestors in the faith—and so do we. Our ancestors include Paul and Silas, and all of the other apostles whom we have read about and reflected on this past Eastertide season, including Thomas, Tabitha, Peter, and Lydia.

### III

Our more recent ancestors in the faith who continued in the freedom tradition of Paul and Silas include the Pilgrims who set sail for the New World in order to form a new nation where religious freedom was and is a hallmark of our identity.

Our ancestors also include the Patriots who fought in the American Revolution, and who won their freedom from England, freedom of religion, and freedom from the tyrannies of taxation without representation.

Our ancestors include Abolitionists who mounted the legal defense for free Africans who were captured and brought to this nation against their will on the slave ship *Amistad*, ancestors who paid those foreigners’ legal fees, ancestors who helped those Africans win their case, and ancestors who sent would-be slaves back to Africa to resume their normal lives.

Our UCC ancestors also served as engineers on the Underground Railroad, and founders of many of the historic Black colleges and universities in the Deep South, even before the Civil War ended.

Our UCC ancestors also included Freedom Riders who traveled through the Deep South advocating for the civil rights of African Americans in the 1950s and early 1960s. They included people who faced Bull Connor’s fire hoses and police dogs in Selma, and people who marched on Washington with Dr. King.

Name a freedom and liberation movement in this country or most others around the globe in the past three hundred years, and you will likely name a movement that our UCC ancestors have been a part of. Those movements include the abolition, temperance, labor rights, women’s rights, and lesbian and gay rights movements in the US, and the German resistance, the Polish Solidarity, the South African Anti-Apartheid, and poor people’s movements in Central and Latin America.

### IV

In the UCC, and in this nation, we admire freedom fighters and liberation leaders, and we seek and struggle for freedom and liberation, and support others who do the same.

We know that achieving and sustaining these goals requires courage and fortitude, and we know that freedom and liberation can extract a great price from its proponents. We also hope and pray that if such courage and fortitude are required of us that we will “rise and shine” in the face of such challenges.

This is our hope. This is our prayer. It is not easy to rise and shine in the face of such challenges, but there’s good news—we have ancestors. We have ancestors to look to for a spiritual, if not literal, road maps through our struggles, and to provide examples of how to maneuver through the trials that we face.

We also have some great traveling music for the journey that we can sing and play to help drive away the demons of fear that might otherwise keep us from seeking our own and others’ freedom and liberation. We have prayers and songs like those that Paul and Silas said and sang in the bowels of that Roman prison. We’re singing some of those songs today.

Another of those songs is a song that describes Paul and Silas’s experience in prison. This song has been shaped and reshaped and handed down by African American slaves to civil rights workers in this nation over the past two hundred years. The earliest iteration of it was called “Gospel Plough.” A more recent rendition is known as “Eyes on the Prize,” and was popularized in a made-for-TV documentary by the same name (that ran on public television in the 1980s and 1990s). The documentary recounts the major events in the African-American Civil Rights Movement in the US.<sup>1</sup>

The song “Eyes on the Prize” was sung by the Freedom Riders who traveled throughout the Deep South advocating for the civil rights of African Americans, and by members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who organized voter registration programs and anti-Jim Crow actions throughout the South.

In recent years, singer songwriter Bruce Springsteen created a version of “Eyes on the Prize” which incorporates many iterations of this song, including the words sung by the Freedom Riders and SNCC members. You can enjoy view a live recording of “The Boss” performing this song on You-Tube. The lyrics of Springsteen’s version go like this:

Paul and Silas bound in jail  
Had no money for to go their bail  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Paul and Silas thought they were lost  
Dungeons shook and the chains come off  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep\\_Your\\_Eyes\\_on\\_the\\_Prize](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keep_Your_Eyes_on_the_Prize)

Freedom's name is mighty sweet  
Soon we're gonna meet.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.

Got my hand on the gospel plow  
Won't take nothing for my journey now.  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...

The only chain that a man can stand  
Is the chain of hand to hand  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...  
I'm gonna ride that big Greyhound  
Spreading my love from town to town  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.  
The only thing I did was wrong  
was staying in the wilderness too long  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on.  
The only thing we did was right  
was the day we started to fight  
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on...  
Ain't been to heaven, but I been told  
The streets up there are paved with gold.<sup>2</sup>

V

To be sure the struggles for freedom and liberation—whether they are personal, like the struggles to be freed from addiction, mental illness, or an abusive relationship—or whether our struggles are social—like the struggles for freedom from oppression, poverty, or some other injustice—are not for the fainthearted. But there's good news. The good news is that we have ancestors. We have ancestors, and we can learn from them and draw inspiration from their examples. And by the grace of God, we can become the ancestors that our posterity needs in order to draw strength in the struggles that lie ahead. Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K\\_TrfgezqvE&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_TrfgezqvE&feature=related),  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6E1SpPaYPfM&feature=related>