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Emanuel's Lutheran Church, Bellevue, PA
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Acts 16:16-34 • John 17:20-26

Like Paul and Silas, we can wake up one day and we're in prison. Often we don't realize how much we are missing the mark in our lives until crisis arrives. News of health problems often shock us. We hit bottom in addictions, or mental health struggles. Faltering relationships come to a turning point. These crises make us face the destructive reality that we are sometimes in. I don't think they are about God "punishing" us. They are more like wake-up calls. Through them, God invites us to be transformed by the Spirit's grace and love. God wants for us to be whole and happy people, living in community with God and one another. It is our limited vision, our brokenness, our sicknesses, our sin, as individuals and as communities that hold us back.

This happens in our society, too. The Roman Catholic Church continues to face the consequences of how it has handled allegations of abuse within its churches and schools. Our judicial system confronts corporations like Massey Energy in West Virginia—and currently BP and Transocean and Haliburton—for the destruction in the Gulf Coast. Executives are forced to respond to accusations of negligence that had disastrous effects on our world.

In this time of economic recession, we see a crisis now in our society's relationship to money. As people, we have an addiction to spending what we do not have. Our country—and others, like Greece—have budgets with huge deficits. Our national debt continues to expand. Many of the things that we spend non-existent money on matter a lot. They are means of providing education, health care, and food to people in need. As laudable as many of the goals are, something is out of balance in our life together. We may be able to live in denial for a while, but sooner or later, we will see the natural consequences of it all.

We experience similar problems as individuals and families. There are all sorts of reasons why. There's: a high rate of unemployment now; an inflated cost of higher education; banks and cards charge ridiculous rates; crooked deals like adjustable rate mortgages. There are forces in our world that take advantage of us and the money with which we are entrusted. On top of all these, we want things in our lives that are too expensive for us. Every one of us is tempted by this. It boils down to a spiritual problem: we have an unending hunger that we are seeking to satisfy. At the same time, we defend ourselves against the sin around us.

Our congregational problems with money reflect the twisted relationships that we have with it, as a society, and as individuals. For those who receive our

newsletter in the mail, I hope that you read the front page article. If you are not on our list, we have extra copies available as you exit the sanctuary; please take one.

It names the love that many of us feel for God and for God's church. It also speaks of the financial difficulties that our congregation is having right now. There seems to be clear ministry for Christ in this neighborhood. People want to connect with God's presence in their lives—to be fed by Christ in faith—to be encouraged by our brothers and sisters. We want to gather together in this place, and to have the staff support to share God's love with others.

Like many of our households, Emanuel's is currently bound by the imbalanced relationship that we Americans have with money. We are not receiving enough to pay our bills through our offerings. That means we have to use money saved in our Memorial Investment Fund. A couple weeks ago, our council had to withdraw \$15,000 from it in order to pay our congregation's outstanding bills. This bondage holds our church back from being adventurous, generous stewards of the gospel. We're too busy being consumed by doing the basics, like paying for our building and for a full-time pastor. For all sorts of reasons, money has become a master that succeeds in controlling us, and bringing fear into our hearts. Instead money should be a tool for use in bringing about God's kingdom. Please hear me: it is not that we need to close our doors right now. We will continue to have worship services and

Sunday School and VBS right now. But it is hard to tell what our future will be in just one year.

Our council members have been bearing the weight of this stress and responsibility. However the ‘problem’ is not just theirs; it is all of ours. This is not a cause for feeling ashamed. We Americans often go straight to that, perhaps because of our Puritan heritage. We’re simply acknowledging the truth of what is happening. We can only do what God empowers us to do. There are limits to the possibilities. But we often underestimate what we are able to do. God’s power can help us do far more than we generally expect.

The current situation almost seems paralyzing. How do fix the crisis that grows from our brokenness? How are we to live faithfully in the face of such overwhelming conditions?

Our lesson from the book of *Acts* shows Paul and Silas, abandoned in their own prison. Their circumstances were different than ours. They were charged falsely by people threatened by their ministry. The crowd attacked them, stripped them, and beat them. They were thrown into prison, securely guarded to prevent escape.

These apostles responded to these events by doing what they did even in the happiest moments of life. United by the Spirit, they turned to God, whom they trusted. They prayed and sang hymns. I bet that they didn't know what would happen in those moments either. "Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened." (*Acts 16:26*) In shocking, transformative ways, God answered their prayers with action. God shook the world. Doors that were closed blew open with Christ's Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ himself entered our prison of sin and brings the walls down around us. With the gift of God's love and forgiveness, we are granted a new beginning—over and over again. With the gift of the word and the grace of Christ's Spirit, we are strengthened and enabled to see the truth of our lives. As in our individual lives, that doesn't mean God's grace gives us exactly what we want. Instead, we're given understanding and grace to respond. Often God's Spirit may nudge us or kick us toward new ways of living which take time for us to embrace. As traumatic as that process can be, it is still God at work in our lives. Through Christ, God invites us to be freed to embrace abundant, eternal life together. That includes healthy relationships with people, material possessions, and money.

A few weeks ago, I asked you to pray for Emanuel's and its ministry to our world during your personal and family prayer times, This week, please add to that prayer, that we may be released from this prison. God is speaking through our financial report to reveal the truth of our bondage. God reminds us today that we are in this together in Christ. We look to Paul and Silas as examples. God's Spirit draws us together in comfort and unity. Together, we turn in trust, to seek God's healing, to find out God's plan for us.

When people are sick, our Lutheran tradition follows the pattern in the book of *Acts*. We come together and pray for healing with a laying-on of hands. Our body, the body of Christ needs that now. Most of us are within reach of at least one other person. You are welcome to move, as I am, in order to be closer. Please reach out to whomever is near you. Take their hand, or with their permission, touch their shoulder as we pray.

Gracious God, we give thanks for the many ways you have blessed us in our lives. We praise you for the gift of your son, Jesus—and for the grace with which you have brought us into his church. You have anointed us to live as your people, and your ministers to the world. Send your Holy Spirit upon Emanuel's now, upon those gathered here and upon those away from us. 'Father in heaven, for Jesus' sake send your Holy Spirit upon us, the people of Emanuel's; drive away all sickness of

body and spirit; make whole that which is broken; release us from our prison; and preserve us in true faith, to share in the power of Christ's resurrection and to serve you with all the saints, now and evermore." *(Adapted from a prayer in Occasional Services: A Companion to*

the Lutheran Book of Worship, p 94) In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.