

Can we imagine a modern day healer being flogged for curing someone who was ill – physically or mentally? That is what happened to Paul and Silas and Timothy on their first missionary trip. They were visiting the Jewish community in Philippi. A young slave girl started following them around the outdoor place of prayer calling out again and again “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” It was the demons who possessed the slave girl that knew, that saw who Paul and his friends really were. First century pagans referred to Israel’s God as “the Most High God.” So the demon who possessed the girl knew who Paul and his helpers belonged to. The girl followed Paul, Silas, and Timothy for days calling out all the while that these men were teaching about the God who saves. From within the girl the truth was spoken albeit through demons. And somehow, the slave girl was calling out for help.

Now Jesus had exorcized evil spirits in his earthly ministry. Just so Paul came to the slave girl’s aide – he helped her – by ridding the girl of the demons who had possessed her. The first miracle here in the Acts of the Apostles was the healing of the slave girl. But did Paul heal her or was it the Lord. I believe Paul healed her in the name of Jesus.

When the slave girl was healed, her owners lost the income she provided. She could no longer be exploited. But if the evil spirits that possessed the girl could recognize God at work in the world, I wonder ‘why can’t we?’ And why do we turn a deaf ear to slavery today. We might like to think that slavery is a thing of the long distant past, but “The flesh trade is Canada’s dirty little secret.” That is the title of a report by Joy Smith written for the *Calgary Herald* this Spring.¹

Sadly, modern day slavery is alive and well, my friends. Joy Smith wrote that “Every minute – every sixty seconds – two children are sold into sex trafficking.” Each year around the world 1.2 million children are sold into modern-day slavery. We might think

that here in a country known for tolerance and acceptance and justice that this sort of human rights injustice does not happen, but not so. Sex trafficking in Canada is on the rise and victims are speaking out. They are crying out for help. I am not saying that human trafficking is any better in the US, indeed it is much worse with commercial human trafficking on the rise particularly since the recession. But the reality is that here in Calgary underage girls are being targeted for exploitation. There have been recent arrests for human trafficking for the purpose of prostitution, right here in Calgary. Why, why, we might ask is this allowed? I will tell you. Sex trafficking is a \$32 billion dollar industry with more profits than Nike, Google, and Starbucks combined.² The Canadian Security Intelligence Service estimates that domestic sex traffickers earn an average of \$280,000 from each victim under their control each year. Those slaves under 18 years of age are more profitable with the most attractive age being 13 on average and that is getting younger all the time. It's all about the profit profit gained mainly by the exploitation of our most vulnerable young women and girls who are being held against their will.³

These modern day slaves are calling out for help. How might we be being called to help the young women, ourselves? Would that Paul were here to heal them.

Then came the second miracle of the day. For his efforts to help the slave girl Paul and Silas were hauled before the authorities for “disturbing the city” because they were Jews advocating customs that were supposedly not lawful to Romans. But really the offence was that the slave owner had lost the profits – the income – from the divining of the slave girl. So Paul and Silas were beaten with rods and thrown into prison. During the night they were praying and singing praises to God. The other prisoners were listening, but the jailer slept soundly until an earthquake broke open the doors of the prison. The walls came down – in more ways than one. When the jailer was shaken awake he feared that all the prisoners had escaped. Knowing that he would be punished severely, he was about to kill himself when – from the rubble – came Paul's voice. He said: “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer fell to his knees before Paul and Silas and asked “Sirs,

what must I do to be saved?” They answered “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And it came to pass. The jailer asked for help. And God provided teachers for him and his family and they were saved. The jailer in turn helped Paul and Silas, by feeding them and caring for their wounds in his own house.

The slave girl asked for help. The jailer asked for help. And they both received salvation. They were saved by invoking the name of Jesus Christ. Later in Acts, Peter said it so perfectly: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

My brothers and sisters, it is the risen Christ who did both these saving deeds. Paul healed and taught “in the name of Jesus” (2:18). The second miracle was not the earthquake that freed Paul and Silas, but the conversion of the jailer and his family. Surely the walls kept the prisoners in until they crumbled. But the falling fortress walls also allowed the jailer to ask for help in seeking salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

I wonder what walls need to be broken down for us. We use walls to hide from the darkness in the world, but also to hide from each other and from ourselves, don't we? A good wall is a sure defense from those things that are too painful to deal with. We all repress hurtful memories. We deny our obvious shortcomings – just as we deny, no I deny, having a problem with weight. We channel our energy away from those things we ought to deal with more directly. Our false bravado sometimes is a wall to cover our inadequacies. I could go on and on, but I am getting onto shaky ground, I fear. And the ground must be kept strong to support our outer and inner walls. But as someone recently said: Jo, you are called to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. It is uncomfortable to talk about the walls we build to keep the enemy out and the inner ones we build to keep ourselves safe. Living behind walls is lonely. Do we really want keep people from seeing who we really are? Fred Buechner has written a book entitled *Whistling in the Dark, A Doubter's Dictionary*; it is an ABC of theology for us doubters – inside and outside the church. He says that we whistle in the dark to pretend that the

darkness of the world doesn't scare us. But the dark can be overcome by our trust in the living light of Jesus. We cannot be who God really wants us to be if we hide in the darkness behind our walls. And we surely cannot reach out to others if we stay safe behind the walls we have made for ourselves. Can we shatter these walls by ourselves? No. We must ask for help to break down the walls that imprison us. We can be freed, just as the slave girl was when Paul called out the demons "in the name of Jesus." And as free persons living outside the wall, we can then offer new life to others – like the jailer whose whole family was saved after the walls of his prison crumbled.

Paul taught us to pray in Jesus's name. And so let us pray
God of mercy, come to our aide. Without your help we can accomplish nothing. May we too be unashamed to ask God for help in breaking down the walls that keep us from loving you better and that keep us separated from all your people. Come to our aide, Lord God. Help us, Lord. Help us to raise strong and resilient girls. Give us courage to speak "in the name of Jesus." Help us to be your hands in the world to end poverty and stop violence that leads to human trafficking. May the demand for modern day slave girls disappear and may you equip us to be support for the victims of slavery. We ask all these things in the name of Jesus the Christ.

Lord may it be so. Amen.

¹ *Calgary Herald*, March 14, 2013.

<http://www.calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/Smith+flesh+trade+Canada+dirty+little+secret/8100150/story.html>.

² UN News Centre, International Labour Office.

³ Lest we think human trafficking is going unchecked, last June Canada launched a "National Plan to Combat Human Trafficking. No less than 18 federal departments are working to fight this very serious crime. And legislation has been brought forward. Bill C-49 amended the Criminal Code to prohibit trafficking in persons in Canada. Bill C-268 made child trafficking a new offence with a mandatory 5 year penalty. Bill C-310 redefined the exploitation of trafficking of people and makes it possible to prosecute Canadian citizens and permanent residents who engage in this activity outside of Canada.

The Canadian Women's Foundation is committed to help end trafficking of women and girls.

ACT Alberta (The Action Coalition on Human Trafficking) is committed to preventing this heinous crime and protecting victims by forming partnerships with law enforcement and government ministries and non-government groups and volunteers to identify and respond to human trafficking internationally and locally.