

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

Do you know what it feels like to be invisible to others? Not to be noticed, recognized, or affirmed by other people? I imagine that this has happened to all of us at least once in our lives, or perhaps this is our life- our true self not being regarded of value by those around us.

The experience of invisibility can manifest as simply as being the last one picked for a sports or spelling bee team in third grade, not being invited to a party all your other friends are eagerly anticipating, or as complex as not being considered for a job promotion you believe you deserve. Whenever or however it happens, it hurts. It is humiliating. And it pushes back against one of the truths we hold most dearly: that each one of us has been made uniquely and creatively by a God who loves us and who sends us out into the world each week, after being forgiven, restored, and renewed, in order to make our particular contribution, as we join God in mission in our world.

Sometimes we become invisible to others because of discrimination based upon our gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, or job status.

I read an article this week written by someone who joined sanitation workers in NYC, where he learned what being invisible really felt like. Years on the job had taught the veteran garbage collectors that when they put their uniforms on every morning, they became invisible to those whose garbage they faithfully collected. People never looked at them, but through them. Posing as one of the workers, the author took the initiative to engage the families for whom he was removing the trash. They didn't know what to do. This invisible was attempting to be seen and it was startling and scary. They ran into their homes and locked their doors.

Sometimes when we become invisible to others, we crawl inward, wanting to disappear, often drifting off into anonymity, perhaps falling into depression.

Or perhaps we will put on a façade that others will see and accept more readily, even if it's not our true self.

Sometimes when we sense the risk of becoming invisible, we take the opposite tack, and become very visible, coming out attacking, full of power and control, so that everyone will know us, even if it's not the best part of ourselves that they will know.

In the story today from Acts, the slave girl is invisible to Paul and her owners; she knows the disgrace of not being seen or considered a real person.

I want us to look at the spiritual blind spot which allowed Paul to make this girl invisible, because I believe so much of the mission of God is to erase the distinctions we as humans have created, to make all people visible and equal recipients of the grace and love of God through Christ.

So what happened to Paul, this great apostle who was charged to bring the good news of Christ to the ends of the earth? Why didn't he include this slave girl in the mission of God?

Why didn't he address her directly (only speaking to the evil spirit within)? Why didn't he ask her name? Why didn't he inquire if she wanted this exorcism? Why did he assume she had no agency in the situation? Did he even consider the ramifications for her, if she were suddenly not producing income for her owners, that her life may have worsened, not been made better? Why ever did he not baptize her?

Let's look fairly closely at this situation, for, in it, some of Paul's growing edges are revealed, which may help us see where our own growing edges may lie as well.

First of all, let's explore why he is so annoyed, or more accurately translated, deeply troubled by her declaration that Paul and Silas are slaves of the Most High God.

From a Christian perspective, the words "slaves of the Most High God" may make sense to us, although with our modern sensitivities, we may balk at the thought of being slaves to anyone, even to God. It is helpful to remember here that to Paul the one who is truly free is the person who is a slave of Christ. That person is as free as mortal and dependent human beings can become, for not only does this new slave-master relationship result in freedom from sin, but it also results in obedience to Christ, which leads his slaves into holiness, goodness, and eternal life.

With this framework, we can see how this statement could accurately describe Paul and Silas: they are slaves to Christ, people who live by and proclaim our one and true triune God. We can hear the echo of the Gloria we just said or sang in our heart: For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the glory of God the Father. From our Christian perspective, we can come around to believe that statement to be true of Paul and Silas, and perhaps even of us.

But the ones hearing the slave girl's proclamation were not Christian. They were not Jewish. They were not Jewish Christians. They were not Gentiles. They were polytheistic pagans and would not be thinking of YHWH, the God of Israel. Rather, they would have heard the young girl's testimony of "slaves of the most high god, (lowercase g)," to mean the supreme god among many gods. Her utterance would have been at best misleading, at worse, attaching Paul and Silas to her pagan religion. This story is not about a true proclamation, coming from a dubious source, which is how we may have heard it, but instead is a situation where Paul is confronting a polytheistic and pluralistic society. Paul, with either infancy of thought or with wisdom, is drawing a firm line between paganism and Christianity, which he hadn't drawn between Jews and gentiles.

Luke, the author of Acts, makes it very clear that her utterance was from an evil spirit, a voice from the Pythian deity, the god Apollo who was embodied at Delphi in a snake, a python, which needed exorcism, and that the beliefs and practices of paganism, which included magic, fortune-telling, and soothsaying were not to be brought into the Christian tradition.

We can perhaps understand why Paul pushed back against the pagan belief in many gods which opposed the Jewish and Christian belief in one God, but Paul made what I believe to be a dangerous mistake: rejecting the idea of paganism this slave girl attests to does not mean he should have rejected her. Rather than drawing all people into the unity we hear in John's gospel today by erasing lines that divide people, regardless of their particular beliefs, he drew a hard bold black marker line, not only between beliefs, but also between people. We can understand his rejecting the paganism the slave girl was exhibiting, but he also rejected her, by making her invisible. How is that part of God's mission?

This action of not engaging the "other" in a conversation, in not looking for the common ground, or not allowing the slave girl to hear his preaching of the good news of Jesus Christ, or not allowing the space to be made in her heart by God for her to hear the truth he proclaimed, as God did for Lydia and later in our story, the jailer, he did not follow his customary strategy. Typically, when he encountered a different culture, Gentile or Greek, he affirmed their desire for the holy, found common ground, began a conversation, which allowed space for the Holy Spirit to move.

It seems that, Paul is not yet at the point where, in his letter to the Galatians, he says, "In Christ there is no male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile." The invisible slave girl had no one to speak on her behalf, no one to push past Paul's action of drawing,

not erasing, lines of distinction.

Several truths we explored last week are reinforced in parts of our story today: God is the actor, in that God orchestrated the meeting of Paul and Lydia and later in our story today, God orchestrated the earthquake which set Paul and Silas free and orchestrated the fruitful meeting between them and the jailer; the mission field was not in the predictable synagogue within the city walls, but rather outside the city limits, along the river bank, where the marginal people gathered, like Lydia and the slave girl; hospitality is the natural reaction to being saved, through the invitation of Lydia and then the jailer, to Paul to come into their homes. And that spiritual awakening and awareness do not happen all at once.

Saul's eyes were dramatically opened on the road to Damascus, but even that life-changing event did not reveal to him in that moment all the truth of God. It took time for Paul to comprehend the unity of humankind Jesus was truly offering. It took a community of people around him, some outspoken people like Lydia, to add another morsel of truth to his plate. And in the process, some people were ostracized and made invisible due to his lack of spiritual maturity.

There is good and bad news in this story. The good news is that God keeps working with us, tirelessly and creatively, to reveal true knowledge to us, to open our hearts, and to place upon our soul the deepest of the truths of God: that we are each uniquely and creatively formed by God to bring a particular part of God's kingdom into this world. It takes a community gathered around us for this to happen.

The bad news is that we are never done. We can complete all the bible studies series we want, or have a large repertoire of spiritual practices to draw upon; we may spend quality intentional time in discernment of God's particular call to us and we may believe we have faithfully responded. We may come to church regularly, participate in outreach mightily, give generously, and think we're done, we've reached the pinnacle of being a Christian and now we can coast. But we're not done, as long as anyone appears invisible to us, as long as we draw any bold marker lines that distinguish us from anyone else, as long as we disregard any group of people because we don't agree with their beliefs, for the reality is, we need the invisible people much more than they need us, for us to grow into our true selves.

Let us contemplate together, as we reflect upon this story of the growing pains of the early church, are we erasing lines or drawing them between others and us? I believe the answer matters to God and to our community.

Amen.