

East Hartford  
Easter 7, 2013, Mother's Day

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Psa 97, Acts 16:16-34

### Put That Baggage Down

Can I have a show of hands? Who among us enjoys a good game of horseshoes? Does anyone among us lift weights as part of a health and fitness regimen? Does anyone lift heavy weights as part of their work - rolls of cable, metal, pipe? You all know what the phrase "dead weight" feels like in real life. Hang on to that feeling, that memory of dense, heavy, cold metal for just a few minutes, please.

This story from Acts is rich with elements that are both ancient and contemporary. "A spirit of divination" seems a little odd to us, as belonging to a totally different age and time; while the exploitation of a teenage girl for "a great deal of money" by the men who owned her, happens today with terrifying frequency.

This girl apparently followed Paul, for several days, calling out to folks all along his way. Paul became annoyed, very annoyed. Ever been annoyed? Remember, "Mommy, I want to go home. Daddy, are we there yet? Do I have to do the dishes, get homework done, take out the garbage??" Paul, very much annoyed, called out the spirit of divination which disrupted the flow of money to her owners.

Nothing to do but get even, so they grabbed Paul and Silas, called the nearest cop, then went on to the judge, with a bunch of trumped up charges, gathering a mob along the way, all of which resulted in a thorough beating, and prison, in the maximum security unit, complete with stocks and those chains. Rough, crude chains, hand forged iron, heavy. ---

His fellow prisoners became the new audience for the irrepressible Paul. It says, "Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns at midnight." The earth quaked, the stocks fell apart, the heavy, rough, iron chains were broken, the prison doors opened. The jailer in a

desperate thought to kill himself, picked up his sword, until Paul shouted, “No - we’re still all here.” The story goes on - the jailer repents, believes, cares tenderly for Paul and Silas. He and his household were baptized, a feast was set, and the jailer’s entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.”

I find this a quite wonderful story - but, I must confess, one that seems far removed from my quite ordinary life. Until, I focus on chains, heavy, rough, cold, hand-forged iron chains and ask, “When have I been imprisoned and in chains?” Literally - never. Metaphorically - often.

I am imprisoned by chains whenever I am jealous, envious, afraid. But, to play with the metaphor, those chains are but plastic when compared with the chains that weigh me down when I carry a grudge, savor a resentment, when I will not forgive. When I refuse to forgive someone else, anyone else - my parents, brother, spouse, kids. When I refuse to forgive myself. When I refuse to forgive God.

The chains that bind when I refuse to forgive are as heavy and abrasive as the forged chains and rough stocks that held Paul and Silas in that jail twenty centuries ago. The chains of the refusal to forgive are shackles on our lives and souls. We can move a little but not far. The chains of the refusal to forgive, the resentments that we cherish, become baggage that we carry every day until the moment we put that baggage down.

Additional metaphors may help us understand what happens to us when we carry the baggage of resentment and grudges, are part of the refusal to forgive. Does everyone among remember Ann Landers. She said, “Hanging on to resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.”

Lewis Smedes, scholar and author wrote, “To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you.”

Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, said “Resentment is

like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.” I suspect most of us would agree: if anyone in the world earned the right to carry resentment, and seek revenge, that man would be Nelson Mandela.

(Quotes all taken from “Restoring Hope: Appreciative Strategies to Resolve Grief and Resentment” by Robert J. Voyle, 2010, pg170,171)

Just what do I mean by forgiveness? I believe forgiveness is the setting aside of what is owed in the aftermath of offense or injury. Forgiveness is the letting go of that obligation.

Someone injures us.

Perhaps we gave someone a generous gift, one that was costly in love or time or dollars. No word of thanks has ever been offered.

Perhaps we were abused as youngsters, betrayed by a spouse, or set up by a coworker. The very least that is owed is an apology, a “please forgive me” which 30 years, or 30 days later has never been spoken and it seems unlikely that it ever will be.

Whatever it was - it was - past tense. The injury, the offense happened. All wishing in the world that it had been different is useless, for no one can change the past.

Now, when we have been injured, then find ourselves carrying the grudge, feeling the resentment, we know that we have not yet forgiven. Even as I speak about forgiveness, you may feel some objection to forgiving someone who has hurt you, “he should have known better”, “she never should have done that.” Know what? - you are right. What ever the offense or injury - it should not have happened. You are right. And we have to move forward, only our future is available to us.

Now - forgiveness is not a lot of things...

    forgiveness is not reconciliation.

    Forgiveness is not forgetting.

    Forgiveness does not require anyone to go back to a dangerous place. The battered spouse does not have to move back in with the batterer, whether the batterer used words or fists.

    You may forgive the debt your nephew owes you; forgiveness does not mean that you have to loan him more.

Forgiveness does mean that you are secure in that spirit place, that safe place where you know yourself to be God's beloved child, where you know that nothing can mess that up. You are God's beloved child no matter what.

Forgiveness means that from that place of love and safety, in the sure knowledge that we are truly God's beloved, we can, in our imagination, place the offense all of it into a duffle, and place that baggage on the ground.

Forgiveness means that in the sure knowledge that we are truly God's beloved, we can release the offender from any debt that is owed to us whether it be a debt of gratitude, or repentance, or dollars. In your imagination place the debt into that same duffle. Now still in your imagination, step into your future and leave that baggage there, on the ground, behind and behinder as you walk into your future, free in love and free to love.

Forgiveness means that in the sure knowledge that we are truly God's beloved, we can in your imagination, say, "I wish you well" even as we walk on surrounded, warmed, carried by God's powerful, steadfast, healing love.

That is what forgiveness means. Forgiveness that we have put the baggage down, and we are free. We are free for love and blessing, free to receive and give love, free for new life. We pray, "forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us". These words from scripture are woven into the wedding liturgy, "Forgive as freely as God has forgiven you." Let us forgive as freely as God has forgiven us ... Put that baggage down.

Let us walk, no. Let us dance into our future with joy.

I am deeply indebted to Robert Voyle, author of *Restoring Hope: Appreciative Strategies to Resolve Grief and Resentment* for this understanding of forgiveness and how to forgive.

