

Before we read today's scripture- I want to offer a trigger warning, as I will be mentioning suicide this morning in the sermon. Also, before we read, a little background of today's text. In chapter 15 of Acts, the Jerusalem Council convenes in Jerusalem to discuss salvation for Gentiles in the church. Led by the power of the Holy Spirit, "the council reaches a united decision that faith in Christ is sufficient for Gentiles' salvation; they aren't required to keep the whole Law, though it's recommended that they observe a few vital Jewish restrictions" (*CEB Study Bible*, p. 249). A letter describing this big change is then sent out to the churches via missionary delegates like Paul. At the beginning of Chapter 16, Paul and Silas reach Lystra where they meet Timothy, and Paul invites Timothy to join their mission team. They travel back to the cities where they had been before informing them of the council's decision to include Gentiles in the church. They then travel to Galatia and then on to Troas (because the Holy Spirit wouldn't let them go elsewhere) and end up encountering a woman named Lydia, who becomes a believer (that's for another sermon). Then still in Philippi, a Roman colony as culturally Roman as you can get without being in Rome, on the way to the place of prayer, Paul and Silas encounter an unnamed slave girl who was possessed by a fortune-telling spirit. She made her owners a lot of money. Paul got so frustrated by her following them around and constantly outing them as the "slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation" (v. 17)- that he exorcised that spirit right out of her. For her owners, this slave girl was now useless to them- no longer a money maker (this is whole other sermon as well). The angry slave owners grabbed and dragged Paul and Silas into the city center to make a spectacle out of them- beating them and falsely accusing them of causing an uproar. Nothing economical is mentioned at all- no damage to property.

Nothing. Rather, they go low and “appeal to cultural pride and prerogative. They want this to be seen as an assault against Roman identity and values” (*Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, Matthew Skinner, p. 120). Maybe they take this approach to show that Jesus’ name isn’t so powerful after all and/or to rile up the crowd? And that’s exactly what happens. To appease the crowd, the unofficial judge and jury, the authorities order that Paul and Silas be stripped, beaten and thrown into the innermost cell in prison, their feet fastened to the stocks. This whole Jerry Springer spectacle “appears designed to discredit the men along with their message, and also to demonstrate the colony’s control- and by extension, Rome’s control- over them” (Skinner). It usually boils down to power, doesn’t it? Let us go to God in prayer. **PRAY. READ.**

May is Mental Health Awareness month, and after reading through today’s text, this story hit me on a different level. As it approaches midnight, other prisoners listened to Paul and Silas, who were securely bound, pray and sing hymns to God. Never underestimate the power of praying and singing hymns. Especially when you have been stripped, beaten, and thrown in prison with your feet fastened in stocks. All at once there was a violent earthquake that somehow managed to shake the prison’s foundations, opening all doors and loosening all the chains but not bringing the roof down on top of the prisoners. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> prison escape story in the Book of Acts. However, this one comes with a twist. As with the other two, Paul and Silas were arrested unjustly. And even more than the other two, they are “locked up securely, in the innermost cell of the jail with their feet locked in stocks. And as the other two stories, those things keeping them locked up are miraculously disabled- in this case an earthquake opens *all* the prison doors and releases *all* the chains on prisoners while Paul and Silas are singing hymns. But

unlike the other two scenes, there is actually no escape” (O. Wesley Allen, Jr., [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). When the jailor woke up and saw that the prison doors were open, he assumed there had been a prison break and was about to take his life to possibly avoid the shame and punishment that would come from having failed his duty, but Paul quickly and loudly shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! For we’re all here!”

“Don’t harm yourself! For we’re all here!” “Don’t harm yourself! For we’re all here!” A few weeks ago a colleague told me a story of one of her parishioners whom she was hoping could share her testimony at GOAL’s Nehemiah Action concerning mental health and specifically the 988 number, which is the 911 for mental health emergencies. The reason her parishioner couldn’t share her testimony is that she wasn’t yet 18 years old, and GOAL’s rule is that you have to be 18 to share. This young woman says that the 988 operator on the other end of the phone- that trained stranger- saved her life one night when she was contemplating ending her life because she was gay. In the cases of our loved ones who have completed suicide, we may never know what thoughts formed in their minds that caused fatal harm against themselves. “Yet, I do know this. The accusing voice that bullies them, the accusing voice that lies to them, that makes them lift their swords against themselves is NOT the voice of God. And I also know intimately of the unholy mix of anger, guilt, and grief that visits us who have survived someone we love completing suicide, and that same accusing voice that lies to us as well telling us “if only” or “we should have.” Who among us has not been touched by this brutally complicated sorrow” (Bolz-Weber)?

“The jailer senses doom, not from the prisoners themselves, but from his bosses in the imperial system. It will be the end of his worth in the eyes of the empire, and thus, he figures, will be the end of his life. But then come Paul and Silas, who say, *we do not play by the rules of this world. You are worth more than your work. You are a person who has value outside of your job, outside of any acknowledgment the imperial economic system gives to you.* ‘Do not harm yourself; we are all here.’ We’re in this together. We see you, jailer, not as another cog in the wheels of Rome, but as a child of God, a person with value not because of anything you do, but just because you are. The jailer is flabbergasted by this turn of events. The earthquake may have shaken the jail, but Paul and Silas’ compassion has shaken him” (Cameron B. R. Howard, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)). When the prison was illuminated, the jailer fell trembling at Paul & Silas’ feet. Then he led Paul & Silas outside and asked, “Honorable masters, what must I do to be saved?” (v. 30). They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved- you and your entire household” (v. 31). Who knows if that was the answer the jailer was looking for, but it was the answer that changed his and his household’s lives forever. In the eye of the storm, in the moment of crisis, someone, something rises or in this case...stays put. All of the prisoners stay and Paul and Silas offer a message of salvation, and before the night is over, bread is broken, wounds are washed, and the jailer’s household is baptized.

In today’s passage, I am deeply moved that Paul and Silas, and their fellow prisoners do not run. Instead they cry out in the dark, “Do not harm yourself. For we’re all here” and how that word was enough for that jailor to drop his sword. “Yet, as powerful as that can be, perhaps we best not tempt ourselves to believe

that that's all it ever takes...because too many of us have stories of how that same kind of thing didn't work at all. A friend told me last week that unfortunately, some cases of severe mental illness can be so chronic- that she understands them as a terminal illness. And yet, importantly, sometimes it can matter, there are those in our lives, or maybe there are those in this room who were telling themselves a story with no escape but death and yet someone said a thing or did a thing which diverted their impulse and somehow they are still here. I praise God for that! So this is all such a tender, brutal, and complicated mystery. And given all that, we have to ask...does what we as the church do even still matter" (Bolz-Weber)?

As Melinda just shared with you all, we had 87+ people from Triune out of the 1634 people of faith at GOAL's Nehemiah Action last month. We, of course, have been praying and some of us singing as we continue to address the two large issues of Affordable Housing and Mental Health. I've spoken many times on the Affordable Housing issue but I've said very little about Mental Health. I must confess that I tend to tread very lightly as a pastor speaking on mental health- mainly because the church as a whole has done a terrible disservice to mental health awareness- mostly by either ignoring it or by offering bad theology and/or advice. We, as a church, have often shamed ourselves and others about our/their mental health. That's got to stop! Let me be clear. I'm not saying that what's wrong with you if you're contemplating suicide is that you need to know Jesus, and I'm going to try and convert you. No. That's not my job anyway. I hope you will never hear shame from my mouth involving mental health. I am grateful for my anti-anxiety medication and for talk therapy. And let me say this. "The pain of

the present does not have to determine the possibilities of the future” (Nadia Bolz Weber, sermon on 5.29.22, Festival of Homiletics). Today I want to talk about when the church can’t be the “we’re all here” physically or professionally and yet we can be in spirit through ensuring that resources are available. A disclaimer: we still have a long way to go in providing more resources for Mental Health. The resource I want to highlight today is 988 Suicide Lifeline, which is what GOAL is working to make just.

**What’s the Problem- in other words- what did we find out doing our research?** A few years ago the governor of SC mandated that 988 be put on the back of all student IDs. Supposedly anyone can chat, text or call and receive help in a mental health crisis, especially when contemplating suicide.

- We discovered that In 2022, over 46,000 people in South Carolina contacted our 988 mental health emergency line
- Of those 130 people a day, less than half received an in-state response
- Of those unanswered, 30 a day are youth and children

**What’s the Solution?**

- After our Nehemiah Action last year we got our state legislators to secure \$3.9MM in funding for the 988 mental health crisis line, ensuring the call center is fully funded and all calls were answered in state
- The new amount needed to be fully funded in the next upcoming budget will be \$4.1MM
- **What we asked** of our State Legislators this year at the Nehemiah Action:
  - To commit to fully funding the 988 Suicide Lifeline with \$4.1 MM in the next upcoming budget and committing to full funding in years to come?

**Why do we do this?** We do this because as people of different faiths, our faith calls us to speak up and out for injustices happening in our community. We do this because as followers of Jesus Christ we don't run from being uncomfortable, even when we're tempted to escape, but instead we stay and say, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!" We care about you! Let's get you help from professionals. We see you and your pain, child of God. Yes, our faith in Jesus Christ still matters!

"While prayer and worship can lead to the loosening of shackles that are physically visible, what happens when we remain bound in ways that are not readily apparent? What if the prison break story isn't about Paul and Silas? What if the prison break is teaching us that liberation is a communal act? Recall that *everyone's* chains were broken, not a select few. As civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer declared, 'Nobody's free until everybody's free.' We, as the people of God, "must work to seek justice by making the path clear, and removing the obstacles..." (Jennifer T. Kaalund, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org)).

Fellow pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, writes in her blog about leading worship on Easter Sunday in the women's prison in Denver, CO. Her mind began to wonder during a song and then she came back in focus and realized that she was surrounded by 175 women in prison greens singing, *If you've got pain, he's a pain taker. If you feel lost, he's a way maker. If you need freedom or saving, he's a prison-shaking savior. If you've got chains, he's a chain breaker*" (Zach Williams, *Chain-breaker*). As your pastor, let me say this. If you ever are contemplating suicide, please reach out for help. Call 988. Call me. Talk with one of our wonderful service providers here at Triune. Reach out to a trusted friend or family

member. Ask for help. “Don’t harm yourself. For we’re all here.” “And there are wounds to clean and meals to share and you are not- you are NOT gonna want to miss the impossible, beautiful things to come. We are here. And we want you to stay for all of it” (Bolz-Weber). To God be the glory. Amen.