

Many Ways of Release

As we move into a time of reflection on this final Sunday in the season of Easter (the season of resurrection – newness of life), we recognize the gift it is to be freely gathered for worship on the live stream and in this space along the St. Croix River – on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we now have the opportunity to weave ways of community.

I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a word of prayer. God of all, we turn toward your wisdom, power and love. Help us to learn your way of release. Guide us to actively participate in release for ourselves and others. We pray as followers of Jesus, your risen one. Amen.

To release is to set free from restraint or confinement. In Peter Friedrichs' poem entitled "Release," I was moved by his description of our common human longing for release. Hear again a brief excerpt:

*"I wish I were like the trees, Who let their leaves go...
Or the tumbling stream, that flushes silt to sea...
Or the dandelion...Unleashing its future..."*

*Instead, I drive white-knuckled,
defensive, as we were taught,
Tense and guarded for
what may come my way..."*

Knowing that I struggle with balance between restraint and release, I wonder if many of you do as well. I appreciate this very brief prayer that Friedrichs articulates for himself and for all of us: *"This day, a prayer: To ease my grip on what once was, or what is meant to be."* To ease my grip. Might we accept that invitation into less white-knuckled living? And, if we accept, how will we live into a way of release?

Many wise ones share messages about the value and power of pausing. Each of us lives at a pace that is unique to our brain chemistry and our circumstances. Regularly pausing in the midst of any pace can be a catalyst for healing and growth. This is why mindfulness practices have become so popular and well embraced – because they have very real positive impacts on lives.

Approximately 10 years ago, I was introduced to a resource for adult faith formation called *Animate: Faith*. It is a dvd-based series that spurs conversations about core concepts of Christian faith. In a segment focused on salvation, pastor and author Shane Hipps describes a moment when he was home on holiday from college. He was feeling stressed but hadn't really explored why. His father encountered him – I believe out on the driveway at the basketball hoop. Asking Shane if he felt like talking about what was on his mind and heart... and not getting much of a response, the father asked if he could pray for his son (which was not very typical of their interactions). As Shane describes it, his dad then put one hand on Shane's chest and the other on his back, saying that it felt like Shane had a tightness he was carrying right there. As his father prayed the God would loosen the tightness in his son's heart, Shane could feel a knot releasing and uncoiling inside him. His relief at release came out in a flood of tears.

I do want to offer a counterpoint (for us to consider) to the value we find in moments of release. Are you familiar with the phrase, "I just couldn't resist"? Those words are typically followed by a description of words spoken or actions taken in a flurry or gushing movement. I have a theory that, actually, more often than not, we CAN resist speaking or acting in particular ways. In my life, it sometimes feels truer to admit that I have CHOSEN to not resist speaking or acting in a particular way.

Let me explain a bit more. Sometimes uncomfortable or painful feelings and thoughts build up in our insides. We avoid healthy release, holding back from sharing with someone what we are really feeling or thinking. We consciously choose to resist release – perhaps because we fear conflict, perhaps because we undervalue our own experience and perspective, perhaps because we fear rejection. Eventually, those feelings of woundedness, isolation, or anger simmer long enough to reach a boiling point. When we are about to release feelings and thoughts that we have resisted releasing (when we reach that point – when we either can't resist or choose not to resist any longer), we need to be very mindful to tend to the truth we need to share. Because it is at the boiling point when we risk doing great damage to a relationship by trying to cause the other as much hurt as we've been storing up. We may choose not to resist releasing our experience to be shared with another. Yet we can choose to do so in a way that honors both our truth and the other person's humanity.

Let's turn to today's reading from the book called the Acts of the Apostles. A close look at the ways in which several characters experienced release can offer us insight to guide us toward release in our own lives.

The first character whom Paul's group and we encounter is the enslaved girl. Enslavement involves existing under the control of another, trapped, confined, and moving primarily at the impulse and command of the oppressor. For many, being enslaved is not just a past experience.

Within present-day anti-racism work, we train and remind ourselves that it is harmful for us to misuse terms of enslavement in our own vocabulary, saying such things as "I was slaving away" or "they had me doing slave labor. For most of us, those are not experiences that we or our ancestors can rightly claim.

The young girl in today's story was enslaved by people who benefited from her gift for prophecy – her ability to see people, the lives they were living and the futures they were creating.

On that day, the child watched Paul and his followers move through her city and could sense how the group was carrying with them the palpable power of the saving way of God's love – how, as missionaries, they had surrendered to the love of God control of their lives. She felt compelled to name it aloud – *“These men are enslaved by the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.”*

When Paul turned toward the girl and spoke directly to her spirit of divination, calling it to release its hold on her, I think of that moment as a threshold for the girl – an invitation to recognize that she, too, was called by the Most High God – beloved and valued in her fullness as a person and not only for her capacity for divination.

Paul and Silas also found themselves in need of release. They had been attacked by a crown, arrested, beaten, and throw into prison. We might observe and learn from Paul and Silas a way of trust in the midst of being stuck. They appeared to stay calm through the chaos of being taken captive and experiencing an earthquake. They knew they had not done violence to anyone, so they held on to hope that they would be released. And, indeed, wasn't it their enemy who was tending to their wounds at the end of the story? In what situation in your life do you need God's help such that you hold on to hope that the next good step toward release is yet ahead of you?

The jailer also found himself in need of release – his was a need for release from the feeling of desperation. Death by suicide has affected many of us – and some of us very closely among beloveds. Desperation is a very real experience. It happens for many reasons. If we haven't felt

desperate, perhaps we've felt a sheer heaviness of failure. And yet, there were those who came alongside the jailer. The text said of Paul and Silas, *"They spoke the word of the Lord to him."* What was this word that was so powerful to turn around his spirit – to bring him up out of desperation? Well, the word of the Lord is the love that Jesus had embodied, the love that Jesus had invited the into as a walk for their life. May we be like Paul and Silas, aware and ready to companion someone in their desperation.

As we move into this day, in hope of finding ways of release, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment – first hearing the sounds of the space around us and then hearing these words of blessing from the poet of today:

*"I long to embrace my life
with a lover's touch,
or as you would an injured wren:
precious, tender, true.*

*Instead, regret and fear,
twin anchors, hold me fast,
close in against the shore.*

*'Cast off! Cast off!'
I hear them call
from the open, exotic lands
my heart yearns for."*

Friends, may we seek release for ourselves and others – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
June 1, 2025 | 7th Sunday of Easter
"Release," Acts 16:16-34