

My friend Rachel is a marvelous chaplain and a self-styled activist. A child of Texas, she developed a fire in her belly for justice early on that manifested itself by her willingness to put herself in the line of fire, so to speak, for whatever causes she felt reflected the will of Jesus Christ for the reconciliation of the world.

It's rather a daunting task to be a self-styled activist because it requires constant assessment of the facts and a willingness to consider other points of view. I've always admired the ways that Rachel very judiciously decided where and how she could and would advocate for justice.

Knowing her as I do, though, I have to confess that I was more than a little amused by an observation she recently shared with her friends. Upon applying for the Canadian equivalent of a green-card, she wrote, "I must not be a very good activist because I've just realized that I was able to attest on a government form that I've never been arrested."

I personally have never been arrested. I've been in jails. Several times, as a matter of fact. I remember very distinctly one of my first acts of ministry when I went to the Second Presbyterian Church in Indianapolis was one of visiting people in jail. As other staff members conducted a worship service in the Brownsville jail, the senior pastor, Bill Enright and I stayed behind in the lobby so that we could be visitors for inmates who didn't have any visitors. I wrapped up my visit and sat there watching dumbfounded as Bill counseled with a young man. Their conversation went on and on. The man wept and then his face became brighter and they finished their conversation. He was clearly

better than he had been when Bill started talking to him. I said, “Bill, what did you say to him?”

Bill replied, “That’s between him and me. But he’s going to turn his life around.”

I’ve been in jails other times as well. I’ve gone to jail to be with misguided adolescents who thought that it was a good idea to mix alcohol and automobiles. I’ve sat across the table from a rich man who convinced himself that one line of cocaine wouldn’t be his undoing; he’d control it this time. I’ve sung in the choir at prison worship services where we saw more than on inmate find new hope and redemption in Jesus Christ.

But, there is one thing that I have noticed every time I’ve been in jail. No matter whether it was New Jersey, Indiana or North Carolina – I’ve not yet visited a jail in Georgia, let’s keep that trend going, shall we – the one thing I’ve noticed every time is that there is absolutely no mistaking the sound of the jail closing.

It’s a mechanical, solid sound.

And it gives me the creeps.

Even as a non-inmate, I find it to be a bone-chilling sound. Once that jail door closes, you can’t get out unless someone lets you.

I hate it. Jesus called us to minister to those who are in prison – otherwise I’d probably have stayed away after the first visit.

Which makes a note that I read this week all the more poignant.

The Rev. Dr. Rodney Sadler is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Union Presbyterian Seminary. I came to know Rodney when I was living in Charlotte as he is a professor at the Charlotte campus of Union Seminary. Rodney is a excellent scholar. He and his wife, Dr. Madeline McClenney-Sadler have a beautiful family. Madeline heads up a

foundation that dedicates itself to assisting incarcerated African-American men to break the cycle of recidivism that makes the prison door a revolving door.

Last Monday, the Reverend Dr. Rodney Sadler got himself arrested. In his article, “I Went to Jail on Monday,” Dr. Sadler wrote, “This was a difficult choice for me to make for many reasons. In part, it was difficult because I had never been arrested before. I am a nearly 46 year old African-American man who had never been handcuffed, fingerprinted, frisked, booked, mug-shotted, or locked behind bars (except by choice as a visitor to a prison.). I have worn this as a badge of honor and intended to maintain this streak for the rest of my life. This avoidance of the criminal justice system really meant a great deal to me given the statistics related to black men and incarceration.”

I’ve always admired Rodney for his intellect. I admire him now for his conviction.

Now, it happens that I agree with him on the convictions that led to his arrest. I agree deeply that it matters how our political system system treats those we would term, “the least of these.” But that’s my personal belief. Whether I agree with him or not, I admire the strength of his conviction.

I admire that his belief in Jesus Christ led him to go to the North Carolina statehouse and make his convictions known.

Belief in Jesus Christ has been known to lead to arrest.

Perhaps I should ask the parents who presented their children for baptism today just once more... “Are you sure?”

What else can we conclude about our passage from Acts that we read today? I’m not sure it can be put any more plainly than that the belief in Jesus Christ led straight to jail.

Paul and Silas were arrested for what they believed. Be sure, they were arrested for what they did, but what they did came about because of what they believed.

It started off well enough – a slave girl who had the spirit of divination kept following them around proclaiming that they were God’s people, “slaves of the most high,” she called them.

Remember that Paul was that most exalted of the social strata – he was a Roman citizen. No one could ever confuse him with a slave in the earthly sense – but a slave of the most high, that he was.

Apparently, however, Paul could only tolerate having a strange woman following him around making proclamations for just so long. In time he began to find it annoying so the text tells us that he ordered the spirit out of her in the name of Jesus Christ.

In and of itself, this is odd. But it becomes even odder when the owners of the slave girl drag Paul and Silas before the authorities.

Now, make no mistake about it: this is about money.

But when they are dragged before the magistrates, the charges are for disturbing the peace.

After vigilante justice has been administered, stripping and beating, Paul and Silas wind up firmly locked away in jail.

Not just in jail, I might add, but the innermost cell, fastened to the wall by stocks.

That’s sort of like being shackled, hand and foot, and locked up.

But this is where the story gets really odd.

Around midnight they are singing hymns and praying, and the story tells us the prisoners were listening to them.

I mean, who wants to hear someone singing hymns in the middle of night?

I love hymns... I'm looking forward to hymn-sing Sunday this summer, but let's get this straight... if you and I wind up in jail together at some point, let's please refrain from singing hymns at midnight.

But the story tells us the prisoners were listening to them... doesn't that make you wonder just what songs they were singing in the cell?

What would you sing in jail? What's your "song of the cell?"

I like *Amazing Grace*, I think everyone knows the words at least to the first verse... or maybe *Come Thou Fount...* *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less* seems lovely for such occasions as one's unfortunate incarceration...

Whatever it was, the prisoners were listening.

And that is when the story gets odder still...

The earth shakes and the doors are blown open by the force of it. The shackles fall away. If the gospel calls us to take on the chains of others in order that we might bear witness, if the Gospel calls us to carry our convictions to the jailhouse, if the Gospel calls us even to sing our hymns while chained to the wall, shouldn't we know as well that it is the Gospel that causes the prison doors to fling open and the chains to fall away?

There are all kinds of prison walls. Sometimes they're visible.

Oftentimes, they're not.

I have absolutely no idea what your prison walls might look like, if you have any.

I do know a lot of the time a lot of people feel particularly trapped, almost as if there isn't any chance that things might change.

The song of the cell is that jails and shackles and chains are never the final story.

Now look, I don't want to sell you a bill of goods when it comes to transformative power of the Gospel.

Sometimes it takes a long time for the prison doors to fling open. Sometimes it takes an aching long time for the shackles to fall away. But the promise of the Gospel is that they do.

And I don't want to promise you an earthquake when in reality the tools God uses to break us free may just look a little more subtle: a therapist or an addiction counselor, a listening ear at the right moment. Respect for each person as a child of God of inestimable worth... did you know that *respect* is a tool in Jesus's jail-breaking kit?

My friend DC Horne talks to *everybody*. I'm serious. Once I was at a charity breakfast – don't get me started on how I feel about breakfast meetings – but this non-profit invited a bunch of clergy to come to breakfast and preferably to bring a table full of donors to come and hear the spiel and maybe write a check. It was a lot of schmoozing and being shaken-down. DC and I worked together at the same church and so we'd met and ridden together downtown to this breakfast and we got back to my car and I said to her, "I just don't need to speak to another person all day. I've had my quota of social interaction."

Well as we approached the booth to pay the clerk to be released from the parking garage in the bowels of the hotel, I handed the ticket to the lady in the booth, and DC leaned across the console of my car and struck up a conversation.

"How are you," she asked? "I just wanted to say I think you're doing a great job... it's not easy moving so many people out of here so quickly and I just bet half of them have lost their tickets on the way into the hotel, haven't they?"

Cars were lining up behind us.

“Well yes,” the ticket taker replied, “Folks do lose their tickets, but on days like this we just wave everyone through, we’re donating the parking.”

“Oh that’s wonderful,” DC replied, “Y’all are so generous to do that! You have a great day, now.”

The conversation finished and we continued on our way.

“You pretty much talk to everyone, don’t you,” I said to DC.

“Yes,” she replied. “My children used to think I knew everyone in the world. But when I’m going through the line, I wonder to myself, ‘what if I’m the only person today who speaks to this person like they aren’t a transaction?’”

Oh yes, we might just wind up in jail for Jesus.

Funny to think that we’re the tools in God’s jail-breaking kit, don’t you think?

I don’t have the first idea whether or not Paul meant to go to jail that day... the Bible doesn’t tell us. He was just breaking a captive free when all hell broke loose over it.

I have a pretty strong hunch that you’re going to have an opportunity to get arrested for Jesus sometime – to get stopped, to be held in place by the gospel... what are you going to do? Of course I don’t know that you’re any more likely than I am to wind up in a physical jail for Jesus... I sort of hope not at least, but there’s going to be more than ample opportunity to wind up in over your head due to the work of the Gospel.

When that happens, what are you going to do?

The bible tells us whatever they were singing, the prisoners were listening...

What’s your song of the cell? What tune are you singing?

The prisoners are listening....

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.