

Acts 16:11-40 “Concerning Partnerships”

I struggled to find a way to communicate the point I wanted to make this week until I remembered a book that we used to read to our kids. The story is called *One Fine Day* by Nonny Hogrogian --

One fine day a fox traveled through a great forest. When he reached the other side he was very thirsty. He saw a pail of milk that an old woman had set down while she gathered wood for her fire. Before she noticed the fox, he had lapped up most of the milk.

The woman became so angry that she grabbed her knife and chopped off his tail, and the fox began to cry. “Please, old woman, give me back my tail. Sew it in place or all my friends will laugh at me.” “Give me back my milk,” she said, “and I’ll give you back your tail.”

Okay, my guess is that some of you are thinking. “What kind of a children’s book is this!?! Two pages in and we’ve got assault with a deadly weapon, maiming an animal who’s probably an endangered species, a really horrible example of retributive justice and some seriously unhealthy insecurity issues on the fox’s part because he feels he has to alter his appearance to be accepted by his friends!” Be patient. It gets better. Sort of.

So the fox dried his tears and went to find a cow. “Dear cow,” he begged, “please give me some milk so I can give it to the old woman so she will sew my tail in place.” The cow replied, “I’ll give you some milk if you bring me some grass.”

The fox called to the field, “Oh beautiful field, give me some grass. I’ll take it to the cow and she’ll give me some milk. Then I’ll take the milk to the old woman so she will sew my tail in place and I can return to my friends.” The field called back, “Bring me some water!” The fox ran to the stream and begged for some water, and the stream answered, “Bring me a jug.”

The fox found a fair maiden. “Sweet maiden,” he said, “please give me your jug so I can fetch some water to give the field to get some grass to feed the cow to get some milk to give the old woman to sew my tail in place so I can return to my friends.” The maiden smiled. “If you find a blue bead for me,” she said, “I will give you my jug.” Okay, you see the pattern now, right? Clearly this is not a lesson on unqualified charity. And it doesn’t help that the fox keeps referring to his assailant as “Old Woman” either. If he keeps that up, he’s never going to get his tail back!

Anyway, back to the story – So the fox found a peddler and said, “There’s a pretty maiden down the road and if you give me one blue bead for her, she’ll be pleased with you and pleased with me. Then she’ll give me her jug so I can fetch some water to give to the field to get some grass to feed the cow to get some milk to give the old woman to sew my tail in place.” But the peddler was not taken in by the promise of a pretty smile or the cleverness of the fox and he replied, “Pay me an egg and I’ll give you a bead.”

The fox went off and found a hen. “Hen, dear hen, please give me an egg to give to the peddler in payment for the bead to get the jug to fetch the water to give the field to get some grass to feed the cow to get the milk that I must give to the old woman in return for my tail.” The hen clucked, “I’ll trade you an egg for some grain.” I know ... this is getting tedious. But I promise, the tedium will eventually make sense.

The fox was getting desperate, and when he found a miller he began to cry. “Oh kind miller, please give me a little grain. I have to trade it for the egg to pay the peddler to get the blue bead to give the maiden in return for her jug to fetch the water to give the field to get the grass to feed the cow to get the milk to give the old woman so she’ll sew my tail in place, or all my friends will laugh at me.” The Miller was a good man and felt sorry for the fox. So he gave him the grain to give to the hen to get the egg to pay the peddler to get the bead to give the maiden to get the jug to fetch the water to give the field to get the grass to feed the cow

to get the milk to give the old woman to get his tail back. The fox returned to the old woman and gave her the milk. Then she carefully sewed his tail in place. And off he ran to join his friends on the other side of the forest. Whew!

And the point of this story? This is LIFE. Right? I'm sure everyone in this room has been where this fox has been. You need *one thing*, but sometimes you've got to go through a *lot* of hurdles to *get* that one thing. This is especially true in any of the "helping fields" or nonprofit agencies that rely on volunteers to get things done. And there are times, I'm sure, when we think, "I'm a fox. Foxes eat chickens. I'm standing here in front of a chicken who wants me go on yet another wild goose chase to get some grain. I could accomplish two things by taking this hen out of the picture right now. I could get the egg without having to go round up some grain *and* enjoy a nice lunch because *I'm so hungry from doing all this running around!!!*" But he was a fox with integrity and was able to suppress his predatory nature to do the right thing.

Okay. So what does this have to do with our text? Our scripture this morning comes out of the Book of Acts. It's the story of Paul and Silas' trip to Philippi. This was a long text (sorry Glenn) but there's a lot of things going on. First of all, when Paul and Silas came to town, they met a woman named Lydia, who was a part of the merchant class which means she had resources. They established a relationship with her and moved on to doing the work of proclaiming the Good News as Jesus commissioned them to do.

Then they encountered a slave girl who was bringing in quite a bit of cash for her owners by "divining spirits." Paul and Silas got tired of her following them around interrupting their work, so Paul exorcised the evil spirit from her. Yay for the slave girl because now she's free from this evil spirit! But her owners weren't happy about their source of income going away. So they had Paul and Silas taken to the marketplace and brought them before the town magistrates. Their crime? They were accused of being "Jews who are advocating customs that are not lawful

to Romans.” How unpatriotic! So the crowd beat the heck out of them and the magistrates put them in chains and threw them in jail.

That didn't seem to bother Paul and Silas much because they were praying and singing songs in their cell when an earthquake hit and unfastened their chains. The strange thing is, they didn't try to escape. That's when they met a jailer who was so afraid that he was going to get in trouble for letting the prisoners escape that he was willing to kill himself. Paul said, “Don't do that!” So the jailer came to faith and ended up getting baptized along with his entire family!

Then the magistrates ended up apologizing to Paul and Silas for throwing them in jail for being “un-Roman” when, in fact, they *were* Roman citizens. The magistrates tried to sweep this all under the rug by asking them to leave the city. And who was waiting for them after this wild and crazy 48-hour adventure? Lydia. And she had a place for them to stay after this whole ordeal. Good thing they met her, huh?

I'm sure that at any point in this story, Paul and Silas could have taken a short cut. They could have just ignored Lydia because she was one of those “one-percenters” who might reject the teachings of a man who said that it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter into the kingdom of God. What rich person would want to be a part of any sort of movement where people sold everything and gave to the poor? But they took the time to get to know her.

They could have let that possessed slave girl get under their skin and just turned around and walked away saying, “These people aren't worth it. Let's just go on to the next town.” No, they took time to set her free. When they were dragged before the magistrates they could have said, “Listen ... we apologize. Yes, we're Jewish, but we're Roman Citizens first and foremost. But they allowed themselves to get beaten and thrown in jail. When the earthquake hit and loosened their chains, they could have escaped, hightailed it out of town and never looked back.

But they stayed, and in doing so they helped bring a jailer and his entire family to faith.

Like the fox in *One Fine Day*, they could have put a halt to their crazy train ride at any time and walked away relatively unscathed. They could have metaphorically killed the chicken and put an end to their suffering. But they didn't. They took the time to build relationships and partnerships along the way. And it started with Lydia. Someone who they could have just written off as an unlikely candidate to respond to Jesus' message. But because they took the time to establish that partnership, they have a place to stay in the end.

Folks, this is why it's important to build partnerships in ministry with those in our community. And we don't build partnerships with people because we hope that it will bring more people in our pews so we can keep our institution alive. We build partnerships because it's what we're called to do, and it enables us to live out our mission and witness *faithfully*. "Oh Jesse, why do we have to be involved with the Interfaith Council? Why do we have to work with people at the Jesus Center or CHAT or Stonewall or any of these 12 step groups or mental health support groups? Why do we open our facilities to all these outside groups who scuff up our floors and put wear and tear on our building? Let these people fend for themselves. Let them find somewhere else to do their ... whatever it is they do." We build these partnerships because it's the right thing to do. We build these partnerships because it's what the early church did. It's messy. It's frustrating at times. It seems like more work than it's worth. It seems like we don't get much return on the investment. But we are doing what we set out to do as a reaching church. We are using our gifts and graces for ministry, including our resources, to meet the ministry needs of our community. We're doing it because it's what Jesus calls us to do.