

# The Liberation of Life

*The Mission then, Our Mission today*

Pastor Mario-Seth Morales



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A sermon on Acts 16:16-40

## **Introduction:**

Last week we concluded that Saul was healed of the human condition of violence and destruction on his way to Damascus. He could accept that the people he did not like were fundamentally good. He found himself in the image projected by the voice of Jesus, saying: When you want to destroy them, you are destroying me and destroying yourself. Listening to the voice beyond the physical part of reality, Saul was healed from the human condition of upset. Our hope is that we also can, and so our modern civilization.

This week I invite you to consider Acts 16: 16-40, where “the new Saul,” The Apostle Paul, now he is a follower of Jesus, The Liberator Jesus as described on Luke 4:14-21. Paul finds himself in a struggle with the powers that be. This means that Paul will have to face and resist the spirit of the rulers of this world or better said: the “spirit of domination” that inhabits all oppressive systems (Newton, Bert Ch.1).

Considering this reality, my homily’s title is “The Liberation of Life: The mission then and our mission today.” Let us come together and explore the mission of the liberation of life in this intriguing passage of our Christian Sacred Book.

## **Let me share a story:**

- Walking in the city of Los Angeles, passing survival bags with food and toiletries to fellow humans camping on the streets. As I walked, my attention was captivated by the monotonous movements of a young twenty-ish BIPOC person sitting on the steps of a building, looking at a piece of paper and having a rather colorful conversation with it. This person was dressed in the attire of a big food chain company; however, he was part of this homeless community where drug dependency and self-destruction is the norm, and here is where the future of life for us may seem uncertain.

Many questions and thoughts came to mind:

- This person is homeless but works at one of the largest food chains franchises.
- We are led to believe that when a person is employed even when making the minimum income, one will be able to pay for a roof, groceries, a car, insurance, maintenance, telephone service, which

hopefully includes access to the internet, also to pay for utilities, and pay for gas? There is no way I can do that! No one can, unless of course, we move back to the 60s!

- The reality is that today people become homeless because they cannot access affordable housing. In most cases, the pain is so much that using drugs is a way to kill the pain, even if it is temporary. Even when you are sane, once lost on the streets of any city with no place to go, it does not take too long before one can become mentally ill or heavily drug dependent.
- Dr. Gabor Mate, an expert on trauma, homelessness, and drug addiction affirms that addiction is not the real problem. Addiction is only the symptom that inside a person's soul, there is a disconnect sending a form of message that says you are not good. Thus, a tremendous amount of pain is experienced, which the person wants to take away by being slaved to the use of whatever brings some relief.
- Community cannot be built when its members are denied the confidence that they are fundamentally good people. This is the message Shawn Morrissey Director of Advocacy and Community Engagement at LA Union Station: He speaks of a creative way to face homelessness he calls affordable housing and housing sustainability. He personally experienced homelessness and drug addiction, but he was offered affordable housing, compassion, and guidance. Now he has many certificates that qualify him for the job he does of training care workers and first responders, clients, and community members on how to effectively intervene in the present opioid and homelessness crisis, which are directly connected with the powers that be in our time.

#### **Going back to our Scripture Reading:**

- Paul struggles with the powers that be. He must face and resist the spirit of domination that inhabits all oppressive systems.
- I find it very interesting to think how Jesus saw himself anointed, called to accomplish a mission of liberation, precisely when his people and himself were living under the spirit of domination of Rome. You may remember this passage in the Gospel of Luke. The writer says that Jesus read from the book of Isaiah the part that says, "The Spirit of God

is upon me, anointing me to bring good news to the oppressed by the spirit of domination to those who are poor, announce freedom to the prisoners, give sight to the blind, and release or liberation to anyone who suffers (Luke 4:14-20). Process theologian John Cobb invites us to think of Jesus in a political context. Following Jesus or the Jesus way, Paul soon discovered the need to face the powers that be in their oppressive spirit of domination. The implications are apparent in this passage: life's liberation is not dualistic. Physical and spiritual are part of reality.

- Paul faces the spirit of domination in the life of a slave girl whose job was to tell the future, so her masters profited from her job (Sounds familiar?). Paul appeals to the girl's consciousness, and she finds herself or becomes aware of her state of slave. She is empowered and will no longer be able to foretell the future as she was instructed by her masters. The spirit of domination present in the will of those who were her masters is challenged by the liberation of life. Once the girl is aware of her consciousness as a human fellow, she does not have the same profit value she did before for her masters. She is knowledgeable. She is not an object but a subject with self-determination. She is liberated, that is a form of liberation of life.
- Moved by the spirit of domination, the masters grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them to court with lies. The crowd testifies against them, the masters get a ruling in their favor, and Paul and Silas are beaten and put in jail. They are experiencing nothingness. Sounds familiar?

### **Following Jesus**

- But Paul and Silas are followers of Jesus, so they are aware that: The most tremendous power in the world is the power that comes from faith in life and the creativity faith sparks.
- The spirit of domination in all oppression is resisted with music and meditation also. Earthquakes can be catalytic, just like pandemics, opening opportunities for life's liberation. In this case, Paul, Silas, and any person in jail that night experienced the creativity of mother earth constantly birthing life, or should I say the liberation of life?
- Paul and Silas love their enemy, and instead of harming the jail guard, they stay put, and the fruit of their ethics births more life. Faith in life

sparks the liberation of life: Justice is restored, and Paul and Silas fearlessly face the powers of domination as equals, seeking justice and freedom of life in front of the representatives of the Roman Empire.

**In conclusion:**

- Liberation of life does not come cheap and does not come easy. We see it in Jesus, Paul, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and many allies who love the liberation of life. To follow Jesus means to be willing to face and resist the spirit of the world's rulers, the "spirit of domination" that inhabits all oppressive systems; One must be ready to experience nothingness as Paul and Silas to experience the liberation of life in us and around us.
- Episcopal Theologian Mathew Fox puts it this way in one of his week's meditations. And I paraphrase:

*Our country is experiencing a historical moment of nothingness, where we can find the most tremendous power in the world: Faith in life and the creativity it sparks.*

A Supreme Court reducing USA's jurisprudence to nothing, pulverizing the doctrines of church/state separation; of peaceful transfer of power; of persons with uterus having rights over their own bodies; of gays and lesbians having the right to marry whom they love (an effort is now afoot to kill it from Clarence Thomas, the loudest voice on the court); and defending the planet so that "The Liberation of Life and the pursuit of happiness" has a chance.

As Merton said, "our true self is not easy to find. It is hidden in obscurity and 'nothingness,' at the center where we are directly dependent on God."

Paul and Silas replied:

"Have faith in The Lord Jesus, and you will be saved!"

CONSIDERING this homily, I say: In this moment of darkness, have confidence in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved and become a Liberator of Life

This is the Word of God for ALL! Glory be to God

Amen

## NOTES

1. Regarding the liberation of life by developing affordable housing please explore the organization (among many others) called MAKING HOUSING AND COMMUNITY HAPPEN in the following link:  
<https://www.makinghousinghappen.org/>
2. Regarding the resistance of the spirit of domination present in all the realms of oppression see the Book *Subversive Wisdom: Sociopolitical Dimensions of John's Gospel* by Bert Newton particularly chapter 1
3. In regards to addiction of the homeless in city contexts please refer to the book *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* by Gabor Mate particularly Chapter 17 and 19.
4. In regards to Jesus in the context of Politics and his mission of liberation refer to the book *Salvation: Jesus's mission and ours*, by John B. Cobb, Jr. particularly Chapter 1 and 12
5. Father Mathew Fox meditation on Nothingness is found in this link:  
<https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2022/07/09/exploring-nothingness-teachings-from-the-mystics-continued/>