

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Year C

RCL



Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

John 17:20-26

The Collect

God of Provision and Unconditional Love, On this day when we acknowledge the importance of motherhood among us, we first give thanks that you are a loving parent to us all. From your being all life was born, and in your bosom all creation is nurtured. We give you thanks for the mothers among us, and ask that you strengthen them in their daily tasks. Grant them wisdom in the lessons they teach, patience in the discipline they foster, and persistence in their promotion of decency and compassion, both by word and example. May they

be given the honor and thanks they deserve but often do not receive.

We give you thanks for the wide spectrum of motherhood represented among us today: new mothers and young mothers whose children are in their most tender years; mothers of grown children who transition into empty nests and a new chapter of self-discovery; mothers and grandmothers of advanced years, whose twilight of life is marked by frailty of body but a potency of spirit. Theirs is a cumulative reminder that though our lives are marked by transition and change, your nurture and affection for all your children remains the same.

Therefore, remind us to live with a child-like faith, curious to every wondrous mystery, attentive to your every instruction, obedient to your every command, and willing to share with every one of your children.

We give you thanks, O God, who is a loving Mother

and Father to us all, and in whose name we pray,
Amen.

Acts 16:16-34

With Paul and Silas, we came to Philippi in Macedonia, a Roman colony, and, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magis-

trates, they said, “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and

was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Psalm 97 Page 726, BCP

Dominus regnavit

- 1 The LORD is King;
let the earth rejoice;
let the multitude of the isles be glad.
- 2 Clouds and darkness are round about him,
righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.
- 3 A fire goes before him
and burns up his enemies on every side.
- 4 His lightnings light up the world;
the earth sees it and is afraid.
- 5 The mountains melt like wax at the presence of the LORD,
at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth.
- 6 The heavens declare his righteousness,
and all the peoples see his glory.
- 7 Confounded be all who worship carved images
and delight in false gods!
Bow down before him, all you gods.
- 8 Zion hears and is glad, and the cities of Judah rejoice,
because of your judgments, O LORD.
- 9 For you are the LORD,
most high over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
- 10 The LORD loves those who hate evil;
he preserves the lives of his saints
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
- 11 Light has sprung up for the righteous,
and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted.
- 12 Rejoice in the LORD, you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy Name.

John 17:20-26

Jesus prayed for his disciples, and then he said. “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.

“Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I

know you; and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.”

SERMON

Two Apostles and a fortune teller walk into a bar. The bartender said, “We don’t serve Apostles here”.

The fortune teller said, “I told you so.”

We have a fascinating story from the Acts of the Apostles today. The girl is a slave. We don’t like slavery, but it was perfectly legal and accepted at the time. This isn’t a story about the evils of slavery. This is a story of how often we let the spirit of the times compromise the word of God.

The business interests who owned this girl were making a big profit from her fortune telling. They had invested their capital in this business enterprise, and they depended on the profit from this girl’s work to feed their families and to put a roof over their heads. By the lights of the time, they were doing nothing illegal, and much that was admirable, for by managing their busi-

ness well, they became self-reliant and were not a drag on the rest of the society for their upkeep. The girl had a roof over her head and food on the table; the families of her owners had roofs over their heads and food on their tables. It's very like the people in our own time who invest in clothing factories in Bangladesh which provide jobs for the workers and cheap clothing for us. It looks win-win to me.

Then Paul and Silas rolled into town and start meddling. Before they were done, they'd wrecked everything for everybody. Apparently the teachings of Christ are bad for business. Paul and Silas were flogged and thrown in prison. That's what always happens when you roll into town and start meddling. Things turn ugly, quick. You're very likely to get yourself killed over that. Do you doubt that? Forty-three years ago this last week, students at Kent State University were protesting

our involvement in what they saw as a tragic, unnecessary war. Troops of the Ohio National Guard opened fire on the students. Four dead in Ohio. Indeed, the list of people who have been beaten, injured and killed for pointing out the sins of a society seems endless. Gandhi in India. Mandela in South Africa. Those on the receiving end of the fire hoses in Birmingham. Martin Luther King, Jr. Jesus. The expectations of God for his people are bad for business and business reacts badly to being reminded of that.

Well, if the situation was such a win-win for everybody, why did Paul and Silas start meddling? Our text tells us that Paul was annoyed by this girl.

While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the

spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

I suppose just having a girl following you yelling all the time would be adequate explanation for Paul’s annoyance, but I have often thought there must be something more to it than mere pique. If Paul was just annoyed, wouldn’t he have screamed at the girl and sent her packing? But Paul didn’t speak to the girl. He addressed the spirit within her, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”

You know what? I don’t think Paul was annoyed by the child at all. I think he was annoyed by the way in which the child was being used – for the profit of her owners. The text tells us that the girl’s labors brought her owners “...a great deal of money by fortune-telling”. Even a superficial reading of the New Testament

demonstrates that God values and loves all His children. The status of being one of God's children grants dignity to each person, regardless of status or standing. I think you can take it as written that imposing indignities or suffering upon one of God's children is unacceptable to God.

The indignity imposed on the slave girl arose because the slave girl's owners were forcing her to do that which is not lawful for Jews to do. Moses proclaims in Deuteronomy:

No one shall be found among you ... who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer,¹

The Jews were given a very particular vocation – to be God's people on earth – and very detailed instructions on how to go about that – the Law and the Prophets. One part of that instruction was “No one shall

¹ Deuteronomy 18.10

be found among you who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur...” The men who had dominion over this girl and who were profiting from her labors were forcing her to deviate from the vocation God had proclaimed for the Jews. When, by social custom, or wealth, or position, I have dominion over another of God’s children and I use that domination to cause that person to do that which is not lawful, or when I weigh my profit or comfort against harm to God’s children and value my comfort higher than their suffering, then I have contravened the law of God. You can rightly expect God to be annoyed by that. So Paul did not turn an angry face to the child and swear at her that she was being an annoying little brat. What he did was to restore her dignity by removing from her that spirit which allowed those in whose power she was to profit from her wrong-doing. When Peter “cast out” the spirit of divina-

tion from the girl, he restored her to her correct vocation and place in God's creation.

Restoring her proper place, though, impacted her owners' pocketbooks, and they reacted as power always does – with violence. This is how you can tell that you are not living in God's Kingdom. If you think of violence as the last effective resort, you are not living in the Kingdom.

Now, which is more important, restoring a person, a village, a country to its correct vocation, or maintaining property rights? To the people of the time, protection of property rights and life as they knew it was the more important consideration.

The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to

keep them securely.

This is the place I step into the shoes of Paul and Silas and walk into your town, because I'm going to start meddling now. We're in it up to our necks. The death toll from the factory collapse in Bangladesh exceeds 1,000. These people died because the owner of the building illegally added an additional three stories to his building to meet the tremendous demand for cheap goods. Of course, he could have built legally, but the extra expense would have priced his goods higher than those of his competitors. I suppose if we asked him, he would say something like, "If I didn't do it, someone else would." I suspect he is right about that. He is not the problem. The problem is a global economy which has gone over to the dark side by valuing profit over people.

My guess is that there will be a great public outcry

to hold the owner of this factory responsible. That's the way we approach things like this – find somebody responsible and visit violence upon him. To me, the more important question is this: "When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?" Those are not my words. Those are Eleanor Roosevelt's words. On Mother's Day, we would do well to heed the words of this First Lady. "When will our consciences grow so tender that we will act to prevent human misery rather than avenge it?"

In 1911 there was a deadly fire in New York at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. One hundred forty six people died. The country was horrified and as a result, legislation was passed protecting workers from unsafe conditions and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union was formed to protect the lives of sweatshop

workers. In other words, the people of the time perceived rightly that the spirit of the times, driven only by profit, had become demonic, if you like. It had departed from its prescribed vocation to serve the public good, and had failed in its holistic calling to be aware of all costs – particularly the costs to God’s children who were in the power of the owners of the sweatshops. The subsequent legislation and the formation of a union were the way the people of the time chose to restore the spirit of their times to something nearer to that which it should be. They chose restoration over violence.

I don’t think that will happen this time, though the death toll is five times higher. I think we will take our vengeance on the man that owned the factory building, and walk away from the more systemic and deadly problem – a spirit of the times which insists on cheap goods at the expense of God’s children and refuses to

admit its complicity. I think we will continue to admire how cheap clothes are and never reflect that the minimum wage of a garment worker in Bangladesh is \$38 a MONTH or that they work in unregulated spaces that collapse beneath their feet. And I think that demand for cheap goods will keep that minimum wage at \$38 a month, and will keep those floors thin.

It's easy to find bogeymen and to punish them when a calamity happens and we're relieved to believe that we have "done justice" thereby, but if the spirit of the times are unchanged, if we still calculate the costs of production by refusing to acknowledge the suffering imposed upon God's children by the demand for cheap goods, we are in it up to our necks.

All is not without hope. The story from the Acts of the Apostles has a third act.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying

and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.

If I were to suggest that we need to disassemble the system of domination from which our thirst for cheap goods is slaked you would rightly claim impotence. I cannot unwind the serpentine Gordian knot which is the global economy, and neither can you. God does not require of us what we cannot do. He requires of us what we can do. As Paul and Silas sat, confined within the belly of the beast, they did what they could do – they sang and prayed. That may sound to you like a pretty lame response but after the earthquake, when the jailer asked what he must do, they told him, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your house-

hold.” The message here has nothing to do with heaven. It has to do with living out the promise of the Kingdom here and now by doing what you can do in faith that God will act to restore balance to His Creation. It has to do with a decision to live in the Kingdom now.

I want to shake you, church! I want to shake complacency from you. I want to shake willing blindness from you. I want you to confront the evils upon which our comfort is so often built. I want you purposefully to be aware of where the clothes you buy are sourced, and the conditions under which they are produced and I want you to refuse to cooperate with systems that are offensive to God’s word, no matter how tempting the cheap prices are, for that is what **you** can do.

I am aware that if we do this, demand may be reduced and reduced demand will cause suffering in those countries where clothes are produced under shocking

conditions, but the suffering, as Bishop Tutu observed when he called for disinvestment in South Africa, will be for a purpose – to restore the dignity and value of God’s children.

Each Sunday we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is our responsibility to bring that about, just as did Paul and Silas, by doing what we can do. We are God’s people, and God’s people are not free to live contrary to His instruction:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? ²

It is our responsibility as Christians to speak truth to power. When power acts unjustly, when the desire for profit extinguishes kindness, when power sees itself as

² Micah 6:8

its own god, then it is Christians who must speak correctively. Go ye and do likewise, church.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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