

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Seventh Sunday of Easter

Year C
RCL



Acts 16:16-34

John 17:20-26

Psalm 97

The Collect

o God, the King of glory, you have exalted your only Son Jesus Christ with great triumph to your kingdom in heaven: Do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us, and exalt us to that place where our Savior Christ has gone before; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, in glory everlasting. *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 authori-

ties. When they had brought them before the magistrates, 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

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

We have a fascinating story today. The girl is a slave. We don't like slavery, but it was perfectly legal and accepted at the time, so 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 spirit of God which is at work within us.

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.

Thinking of our relationship with God in such intimate terms changes our perspective. Convincing the world that Jesus was sent, actually sent! from God becomes our calling. That's a big deal, church. A very big deal, because the spirit of the times makes other demands upon us.

The business interests who owned this girl were mak-

ing a big profit from her fortune telling. This is not, ipso facto, a bad thing. 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 spirit of the times, they were doing nothing illegal and much that was admirable, for by managing their business 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 there and cheap clothing for us.

Then Paul and Silas rolled into town and start meddling. Before they were done, they'd wrecked everything for everybody. Paul and Silas were flogged and

thrown in prison. That's what always happens when you roll into town and start meddling. You can get yourself killed over that. Do you doubt that? Forty-nine years ago, students at Kent State University were protesting our involvement in what they saw as a tragic, unnecessary war when 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 is long. 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. What we need to examine is WHY Paul and Silas meddled. 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 want you to notice something there. Paul did not speak to the girl at all. Paul spoke to the spirit within her which had supplanted the Spirit of God which should be guiding her in God’s ways. Paul acted to restore the girl to a correct relationship with God by casting out this alien spirit.

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. 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 men who were profiting from her labors were forcing her to engage in a vocation God had forbidden for the Jews. When, by social custom, or wealth, or position I should have dominion over another of God's children and use that dominion 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

¹ Deuteronomy 18.10

whose power she was to profit from her wrong-doing. When Paul “cast out” the spirit of divination from the girl, he restored her to her correct vocation and place in God’s creation.

Those whose pocketbooks were affected adversely, though, reacted as power always does – with violence. Now, which is more important, the norms reflected in the spirit of the time, or the spirit of God? To the people of the time, the answer was simple.

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. To the people of the time, it was perfectly acceptable, indeed, “normal”, to carry within

them the spirit of the time – the way things are expected to be. In our time, this includes things we are comfortable in opposing, like slavery, but also things we don't like to think about too closely, like the idea that God's laws are flexible. We certainly understand God's commandment, "Thou shalt not kill", but we still build horrifyingly efficient machines of death and unleash them upon God's children if we are convinced that the conditions of the time require it. This spirit of the times inhabited the girl and was cast out, fulfilling Jesus' Great Priestly Prayer:

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.

Is it possible, in 2019, to cast out the spirit of the time and to replace it with the Spirit of the Lord? If God wills it, of course, but it requires sacrifice from us.

The global economy which represents the spirit of our time has gone over to the dark side by valuing profit over people. If the spirit of the times are unchanged, if we continue to 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.

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 that which 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 household.” The message here 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.

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

AMEN

BENEDICTION

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.

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.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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