

Sermons at Saint Paul's

Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World

The Seventh Sunday of Easter/May 8, 2016

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What might it look like if we took the story from the Acts of the Apostles and brought it into the present day? We might say there was a lonely girl enslaved by a spirit of addiction. It could have been heroin, alcohol, opiates, pain killers. The dealers were making money supplying her. She kept following someone named Paul and his friend Silas; crying out that they too were enslaved, but to a Most High God. Paul became annoyed at her incessant screaming and confronted her. She was shaken by the power of Paul's words and prayer. She sought recovery that very hour. The dealers saw their hope of making money was gone, and seized Paul and Silas and beat them with rods. If the Acts of the Apostles told the story today it might sound something like that. Of course, recovery doesn't often happen that dramatically, and sometimes it does not happen at all. And dealers and drug traffickers still beat those who get in their way.

We have seen versions of this story repeated throughout this year. When party candidates got to the primary states of New England, they found an epidemic of opiate addiction and overdoses that reached into the white, middle class in States like Vermont and New Hampshire. Last month the rock singer and musician Prince died likely from an overdose of opioid medication that he had started taking to relieve the rigors of performing. He began believing he could handle it; then the drugs ended up handling him. People suffering from addiction have what is termed "euphoric recall." The memory of destructive behavior fades while the memory of the pleasure felt from the chemical is vivid. The drug ends up handling the one who is addicted to it. We have not been isolated from addiction as a parish, and three Alcoholic Anonymous groups meet here each week.

What ancient observers called a spirit we now know to be a physiological illness. Addiction is a brain chemistry disorder. Moralizing doesn't help. It just adds to the shame of the sufferer and drives them deeper into addiction. Paul does not shame the slave girl. He just calls out the spirit. In the same way, it is for us to intervene speaking directly and lovingly. Intervention works because of the power of dissonance. This is the conflicted emotional and mental state that can no longer tolerate the difference between destructive behavior and the person's own loving values and needs. Intervention tries to amplify that dissonance so that the sufferer seeks help.

Here is how the Bible lessons today describe this process. First of all, everyone in the story of Paul knows what it is to be imprisoned. The slave girl is shackled by whatever spirit possesses her. Paul and Silas are taken to the innermost cell and secured with ankle chains. Even the jailer, when the doors of the prison were shaken open and the chains snapped apart, felt constrained to take his own life. He feared his prisoners had escaped. Although most of us do not have the physiological illness of addiction, we do all know what it means to come up against a wall, a dead-end, a locked door, to feel as though we cannot take another step. It is disheartening. We feel dissonance. What the story of Paul and Silas tells us is that few people get out of those "stuck" places on their own. We all need help. The slave girl needs Paul's intervention. Paul and Silas need an act of God and are confident they will get it. They are down there in their dank cell praying and singing hymns well into the night. Even the jailer needs help. Paul cries out, "Don't harm yourself. We are all still here." When imprisoned in whatever way, we need one another. From our isolation we need to be gathered in, by another, by God, by Christian community.

If the first image of is one of being imprisoned, the second is of mutual washing. There is no judging or labeling, but a clear-eyed assessment of the wound. If there is unacceptable behavior it is identified. If there is emotional hurt it is acknowledged. All is done with love and concern, offering dignified ways forward. Just so the jailer takes Paul and Silas and washes their wounds. The prisoners are cleaned and comforted. Then the jailer and his entire family are washed by Paul in the waters of baptism. They are forgiven and made new. For all it is a new Exodus, out of bondage into respect and dignity. Come out

of whatever enslaves you. “Come,” says the Spirit and the risen Christ. “And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.” The entire Bible concludes with the words *Marana Tha*, in Aramaic, and in English: “Come, Lord Jesus.” That is our prayer. Come and make us whole. Come and free us. Come and lead us home. This is the mystery of faith that we do not fully understand but in which we fully trust: “Christ will come again.” We say it week after week at the breaking of the bread, where we are gathered in and none are lost.

The goal of admitting what it means to be imprisoned, and then cleansed and set free, is to discover that we are all one. This is Jesus’ hope and prayer – “that they may all be one.” The glory given by God to Jesus resides in each one of us: the glorious water of life, the bright warmth of light, the safe shield of love. We are all gathered up in this glory. Paul takes this to mean that there is nothing in all creation that is “able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8: 39). No imprisonment, no addiction, no hardship. Isaiah astounds me by remarking that the gift of God’s glory would be too slight a thing were it only given to one community, or too slight were it even to restore many survivors. No, God wants to give us as a light to the world that “God’s salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” That is the glory given to us. God has nothing less in mind than that the world may believe, and know that God has loved all as God has loved his only Son from before the foundation of the world. That is a deep and abiding love! A trustworthy love.

There are physiological illnesses like addiction that we do not yet know how to cure, but we do know how to treat. Paul’s slave girl was exploited and alone until Paul, who had finally had enough, turned his attention to her. The opiate-addiction epidemic uncovered in New England carries a deep despair and need. A singer like Prince surrounded by an inner circle of admirers and yet tragically alone. Still we all know the feeling of being stuck and wanting out. We all know what it is to seek euphoria and escape into fantasy. We need the light of another to help turn us and bring us into the alternate glory of God; glory over euphoria. Seldom is this something we can do on our own. It is why we gather each week in community and pray for Jesus’ coming. Bring us that

cleansing, living water, Jesus. Fix me, Jesus. Restore us to wholeness and make us one, Jesus. And as we are consoled, help us to console one another, that out of dissonance may come harmony and peace. And that into the inner cell of all our hearts may come the gift of glory that enlightens and unifies and heals not just one, not just one community, but all the world.

Amen.