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First Presbyterian church
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Acts 16:16-34

“When the Gospel is a Disruption”

There’s always been a running debate as to whether religion should be about comfort and inner peace, or whether religion should challenge the status quo even if it makes us uncomfortable. Should the church only be a place of refuge? Or are we called to be something more?

I’ve said before – many times, in fact – that for me, the Church is more than a place to seek refuge. I believe the church is a part of the world, and as such there are times when the Church is called to comfort and console; but there are also times when the church is called to condemn and critique. I believe Jesus calls us to be a part of the world and build God’s kingdom here, which means we are called to engage the world and to help make the world a better place. And sometimes when we do this, it requires us to get loud and disruptive; maybe even take risks; because the gospel isn’t just good news – it can also be dangerous news.

In our story today, we hear a fine example of this in a little-known story about Paul and Silas and the time they got thrown into jail for disturbing the status quo. Paul and Silas, who had come to believe Jesus was the Christ, the promised Messiah, had traveled from Palestine to Philippi. They were there because they believed God had sent them to tell the story of Jesus—how he taught and healed, was arrested and crucified, rose again, and changed the world forever.

The city of Philippi has an important Roman history. After the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE—where Augustus (then Octavian) and Mark Antony defeated Julius Caesar’s assassins, Brutus and Cassius—the city was established as a Roman colony. Augustus settled his veterans there, giving them land and full Roman citizenship. As a result, Philippi became a proudly Roman city, with deep ties to the empire and a population that included descendants of soldiers who fought for Rome’s first emperor. To say that Philippi was a pro-Roman city would be an understatement.

In Philippi there was a girl, a slave girl actually, who everybody knew because she was so different, so peculiar. She was possessed with a spirit of divination, which in literal terms meant a snake. The snake was a python which is a symbol for the Greek god Apollo, which just happened to be Augustus' favorite deity. There's that Roman influence again.

The spirit caused the girl to behave oddly and say outrageous things. In fact, she was so amusing that her owners came up with the idea to sell her predictions for profit. She earned a lot of money for her owners, and it was a very happy arrangement until Paul and Silas came along.

The girl was fascinated with them: started to follow them around and shout things about them, some controversial things. "These men are slaves of the Most High God!", she cried. It was annoying, a real problem. Everywhere they went, there she was, interrupting and shouting. Until finally, one day, Paul had had enough and shouted back, "Stop it! In the name of Jesus Christ, whoever you are, come out and go away." And the stunned girl stopped babbling and shouting and was quiet. Her demon was gone. Whatever was possessing her, driving her, enslaving her, was gone. Which also meant so was her owner's profit.

This makes her owners understandably angry, so they drag Paul and Silas to the marketplace, to the magistrate. "These men are disturbing our city," they say. Notice, though, that they don't bring a charge against Paul and Silas for ending their profitable business. Instead, they accuse Paul and Silas of disrupting their city's Roman identity. "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." In other words: "They aren't our people; and they're advocating customs that are not ours." The accusation has shifted from finances to identity, from profitability to ethnocentrism.

Friends, if there ever was a story about the collision of the gospel with the powers of the world and the upheaval that follows, this is it.

For you see, what Paul and Silas are doing here isn't religious small talk, nor is it comforting spirituality. It's dangerous, destabilizing, disruptive good news that has social, political, and economic ramifications.

Those powerful forces in Philippi counted on free-flowing trade and the ability of those with wealth to pursue it, so the last thing they were going to put up with was people like Paul and Silas whose actions interfered with their profits. So they slander them in the best possible way, by manipulating ethnic and religious prejudices to serve their own ends.

Huh? It seems some things never change. As NT Wright observed: “Not for the last time, when the gospel suddenly impacts someone’s trade, (people) they turn nasty.”

Or as Will Willimon writes: “Religion has somehow gotten mixed up with economics here, and so the girl’s owners do what the vested interests always do when their interests are threatened. They say to the judge, ‘We’re not against a little religion—as long as it is kept in its place.’

Let’s be honest: a little religion that tells people to be nice, be polite, stay in their place -- has never gotten anyone in trouble. But religion that sets people free? That questions power? That disrupts business as usual? That gets you jailed. Or worse.

And so it is that the crowd is whipped into a fury and starts to attack Paul and Silas, and the magistrate orders them beaten and thrown in jail. But then . . .

There was an earthquake so severe that the chains around Paul’s and Silas’s ankles were dislodged from the wall and the doors were knocked off their hinges. Upon hearing the commotion, the jailer hurried to the jail to check the damage and there discovered about the worst thing that can happen to a warden: a major jail break, prisoners all free, running loose. He’s so distraught and dismayed he’s about to take his own life. But here comes another voice in the dark. It’s Paul again: “Hold on. Don’t do it. We’re still here. We haven’t gone anywhere.”

And the jailer, clearly shaken, asks, “What must I do to be saved?” And while preachers may love that question, NT Wright offers a more human, desperate translation: “Can you help me get out of this mess?”

I wonder, friends, if the church shouldn’t be making more messes these days? Oh, I know that’s not what everyone wants to hear. But it seems that God rather likes the mess. I mean, God’s verdict on the mob’s and magistrate’s

actions seems pretty straightforward; after all, it was God who caused that earthquake to happen. So it would follow that God wants the church to engage the world even if we make a little mess doing so. Dare I say, God wants us to get in trouble with the world. In fact, in the book of Acts, every time disciples challenge powers and suffer as a result, the church seems to add to its numbers.

Huh. Now that is some food for thought. I mean, the jailer and his household are perfect examples of this. He doesn't learn about Jesus from a sermon in a pew, but by seeing God's power in action through the bravery of the disciples.

Someone once wrote that "The gospel's best pulpits are created in public conflict, where God's power confronts competing powers and offers a compelling alternative. The gospel does not need to be dressed up or marketed or better translated to our Philippian audiences. It needs to be proclaimed fearlessly in a world of powerful interests." (Connections: Year C, Volume 2, p. 306).

So what do you say, friends? Are we willing to challenge the powers that bind others, and ourselves, and make a mess sometimes?

John Lewis once said, "*Get in good trouble.*" That's what Paul and Silas did. That's what the church in Acts did. And that's what the Spirit still calls us to do.

To proclaim a gospel that breaks chains.

To challenge systems that profit from pain.

To disturb the city — not for the sake of conflict, but for the sake of justice, joy, and God's liberating grace.

And today, as we receive new members into the life of our congregation, we don't just welcome them into a community of warmth and worship — though certainly we hope they find plenty of that here.

We welcome them into the work of the gospel — the kind of gospel that shakes the ground.

The kind of gospel that refuses to stay silent when people are hurting.

The kind of gospel that dares to live differently in a world of powerful interests.

Because becoming part of the church is not about joining a club.

It's about joining a movement.

It's about saying: "I want to be part of something that matters. I want to follow Jesus, even when it's hard, even when it's disruptive, even when it gets me into good trouble."

So to those of you joining today: thank you for saying yes.

And to all of us here: may we continue saying yes to a faith that disturbs the peace — so that true peace might come.

Because that's the kind of gospel we're part of.

One that doesn't stay quiet when injustice speaks.

One that doesn't shrink back when power pushes forward.

One that, when lived out boldly, will always make someone uncomfortable.

For you see, the gospel always has, and always will (if it's faithful) threaten someone's profit and someone's power. And when it does — just like in Philippi — people will start saying, "These people are disturbing the city."

But maybe that's just the sign we need to know we're doing something right.

Amen.