

An Extremist for Love

Acts 16: 16-34

¹⁶ One day as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a female slave who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ 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. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ 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.

Imagine the scene. The apostles are traveling when they pick up a fortuneteller. She's relentless in her mockery, so St. Paul gets agitated with her and casts out the demon. And here's the interesting part: The owners, see that their commodity is no longer profitable and so they call in the police. They have the apostles arrested and charged with disrupting the peace. Sidenote: How often do peacemakers get called disrupters of the peace? The point is: this unnamed woman's enslaved life was more profitable than her freedom. And her freedom is a threat to the well-oiled machine of oppression.

It sounds poignant and true. Money matters more. This week...another shooting. More thoughts and prayers. More doubling down on which political side has the solution. This week the list of schools who have experienced such violence since 1998 grew to 248. This week we've cried out to legislatures again, "No other country in the world deals with this magnitude of sorrow! We must do something! How is this not obvious?" The answer is that it is obvious. But money matters more.

Heard on NPR Marketplace that there are more places to buy guns in America than there are Starbucks around the world. It is easier to buy a gun with 10,000 rounds of ammunition than it is to buy Sudafed. With 70% of these school shootings happening by an eighteen-year-old, one would think that raising the age makes plain sense. And of course, it does make plain sense, but money matters more.

Every time we go through this, there is a plea to our leaders, who all know that in a few short weeks we will all be onto the next issue without much memory of this one...until it happens again. The well-oiled machine of oppression does not care about collateral damage or exchanging lives for economic prosperity. Sure, they would say that our lives matter, but only to the degree that it serves their interest. It's the way of oppression then and now: the owners of the unnamed woman are threatened by her freedom. Why? Because money matters more.

But what happens next in the story is profound. St. Paul and Silas are thrown into prison for freeing the unnamed woman. But they begin worshiping behind bars. They are praying and singing hymns. Regardless of their situation, they are filled with a Spirit of faith and hope and somehow are still free. It's a powerful display of freedom, but that's not the profound part. As they are singing an earthquake erupts, the prison doors fling wide and the chains snap open. It's an amazing miracle, but it's still not the profound part. The jailor awakes and sees the prison doors are open, and thinks to himself *how would I explain this to my superiors? They are going to need someone to blame and they will take it out on me and my family unless I fall on my sword—a dignified soldier's death*. He knows he is only valuable to the degree he serves the system's interests. And just as he is about to fall on his sword he hears a profound voice, "Stop, do not harm yourself. Every single one of us is still here!"

Now, I don't know about you, but if there was an earthquake which just so happened to knock the prison doors open; and if it just so happened that the chains unlatched themselves, I would believe this to be a personal sign of justice from God. I would step through the door and hightail it out of there without a second thought. But St. Paul doesn't step through the door to his freedom. Why? Because he knows what an oppressive system does to its commodified servants. He knows the prison guard's life matters too, and he sees that the prison guard is just as enslaved to the system of oppression as the unnamed woman is. St. Paul sees that the freedom of the oppressed and freedom of the oppressor is woven together. And none of us are truly free until all of us are free. It's profound!

We know it is somehow true—our freedoms are bound together. Which is why it is so ironically frustrating that a country who values its freedoms to buy guns, can't see how enslaved to a gun culture we are. The politicians who are bought by the NRA are not free! Neither are the servants of their ideology. Jesus said if we live by the sword we die by the sword.

The same holds true for white supremacy. If we live by white supremacy, we die by it. It is really no surprise that the suicide rates are highest these days among middle aged white men. Because that's what racism does. It's a dark web which makes us fall on our own sword; and it impacts both the oppressed as well as those who are enslaved to the system of oppression. St. Paul sees

that the prison guard is just as enslaved as the unnamed woman is, and he knows God's Spirit is about freeing them both.

So what does the prison guard do as a response? His heart's prison door flings open. The chains around his soul break. He feeds the prisoners who he starved, and he tends to the wounds he helped to create. He makes reparations and becomes baptized as a beloved child of God who is now enslaved to love. After Dr. King was called an "extremist" by protectors of white supremacy, he said, "I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, but as I continued to think about the matter, I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love?...was not Amos an extremist for justice?...was not Paul an extremist for the gospel?... So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love?"

It's interesting that at the beginning of the story, the unnamed woman calls Paul a "slave of Jesus Christ." The question is: are we captivated by the way of peace or the way of violence? The way of fear or the way of love? Do we find solace in our guns, or do we find solace in God's grace? If we live by the sword we die by the sword, and just as the prison guard is about to fall on his sword St. Paul says "Stop!" and what does the guard do? He becomes enslaved to love too and begins to make reparations and discovers himself truly free.

We can continue to be a church who sets the example. When white communities tend to the repairing of harm our systems of injustice continue to cause in communities of color we break the cycle and we too become free. when we are captivated by the God of peace rather than the gods of wealth and violence, we say "No!" money does not matter more!

If there is going to be any changes in gun legislation—and we will fight for it—we are going to have to show the other side how that they are enslaved to a system of oppression as well. If white supremacy is to become extinct—and we will fight until it is—we all must see how we've all become enslaved to its power.

After the shooting at the grocery store in Buffalo, one of the victim's family members said she forgave the shooter. It's profound. I can't think of anything that requires more spiritual power than to set free and forgive those who are slaves of evil and oppression. But I suppose that is what an extremist for love does. And it might just be that our own freedom depends on it.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy. Amen.