

Don't Exorcise the Messenger
The Rev. Amy Spagna
May 29, 2022 – Easter 7C
Acts 16:16-34

Kids have a habit of telling the truth, very often in an unfiltered way we adults have learned to temper. Question is, do we actually listen to them?

After the shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, the students who survived it organized a massive protest in D.C., which they named the March for Our Lives. One of the young women who spoke at the event took apart the the usual speech of "we can't change this" line by line, with the simple response: "We call B.S."

By framing it this way, she pointed out a hard truth. To say we are anything other than a people in love with our idols, and our leaders are collectively too afraid of losing donor money and influence to do what it will take to help us break free of them, is B.S. It saddens me to say that, because I believe we are, most of the time, way better and way more than those two awful truths. But, it is the truth we hear spoken by the families of dead children from places named Columbine, Parkland, Blacksburg, Sandy Hook, and now Uvalde, and far too many others, and from the broken and traumatized communities left behind in the wake of these evil acts. The grief we share at their loss is also true, as are the questions lurking just under the surface. Why, and how, have we continued to fail the young men who commit these horrible crimes? Why are we so afraid to regulate access to the legally purchased, high powered weapons and ammunition used in these shootings? And why, as we've tragically seen in the years

since Sandy Hook, do the people who tell the truth about what happened find themselves on the receiving end of vile disinformation campaigns, ridicule, or worse?

A similar fate when it comes to truth-telling and unintended consequences befalls a child in this morning's reading from Acts. Paul and Silas, and their unnamed companion who's telling the story, are going to one of their gathering spots when they meet a girl, a slave, who "had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune telling" (Acts 16:16, NRSV). This "spirit of divination" is very similar to the one which powered the famous oracle at Delphi, where fortunes were discerned from priestesses inhaling volcanic fumes and babbling. Even in antiquity, those who sought out the oracle took it with a grain of salt, so it's little wonder that the narrator doesn't seem to think the presence of such a spirit, especially at a place that's nowhere near Delphi and its toxic fumes, is a good thing.

The fortune this gifted slave girl tells is the truth about who Paul and Silas are and what they are doing. She follows them around town for several days, proclaiming them as "slaves of the Most High God" who are in town to do some preaching and teaching about the way of salvation. Paul finally gets annoyed at her constant presence and babbling, and performs an exorcism just to shut her up. While he succeeds, it's not the "win" it appears to be. This slave girl is doubly owned, by other human beings who actively exploit her gift, and by this so-called spirit of divination which enables her fortune telling. While Paul orders it to leave her alone, it doesn't have the same effect on her, or on Paul, or anyone else who happened to see it, as do the other miracles in the Book of Acts. The end result of most of them is that the witnesses come to believe in the divine power behind them. That's not the case here. Paul does manage to free her

from her bondage to that spirit of divination. While the immediate results are decidedly not a positive reception of the gospel, the truth of this girl's statements about who Paul and Silas are remains.¹

The narrator doesn't say anything about the consequences she may have suffered personally when her owners saw that their hope of making money off of her was gone. What we DO hear about is how they punished Paul and Silas for putting them out of business. The nuggets of truth in their reaction are that A) slavery and violence are tied directly to economics; and B) that it is all too easy to use religious language to prop them up. Think about it: The unnamed slave-girl makes a great deal of money for her owners by telling fortunes, which only ends when she speaks the truth about Paul and Silas. Her praise of them is couched in explicitly religious terms, which only serves to mask the demon prompting it. Paul's exorcism not only rids this young girl of the spirit possessing her, but it also takes that same religious language and uses it to, "... actively [reject] the benefits that may have accrued from [her] bondage."²

Because they are active promoters of an economic system rooted in slavery and violence, the actions of the slave-girl's owners are entirely predictable. They do whatever they can to protect their revenue stream, while at the same time ignoring the truths about where it comes from – including their own role in using another human being for profit. We might call their attempt to assign the blame to Paul and Silas a false flag. It actively distracts everyone from the real issues of exploitation and imprisonment,

¹ Jennifer T. Kaalund, "Commentary on Acts 16:16-34."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/seventh-Sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-1616-34-6> [accessed May 23, 2022].

² Jerusha Neal, "Commentary on Acts 16:16-34."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-1616-34-8> [accessed May 23, 2022].

and how the gospel disrupts them. As one scholar points out, "Acts 16 narrates a leveraging of cultural superiority and social fear for the preservation of an economic system that grounds the status quo. The torture, beatings, and social isolation of prison are powerful technologies in that mechanism. Paul and Silas are not imprisoned because they break a law. They are imprisoned because they are imprisonable people—vulnerable people—who threaten the bottom line of the powerful."³

And yet, Paul and Silas' imprisonment is not where this story ends. God intervenes with an earthquake to break the chains holding them down. They baptize their jailer and his entire family when he comes to ask them what is going on. And, the next morning, they even get an apology from the magistrate which reads like, "Oops, we didn't know you were Roman citizens, and we weren't supposed to do that to you. Our bad." This outcome shows, in no small part, that God sides with the vulnerable, and will enable them to do extraordinary things as a result of their faith.

That is hard to see in the face of another instance of domestic terrorism, one which definitely gives people of faith cause to wonder where God is and why so many cries for justice have gone unheard. To anyone who says God is not there, I call B.S. – because God is there, in the faces of people like the Starbucks barista who drove to Uvalde from San Antonio to work so her colleagues could take time off to grieve; like the team from World Central Kitchen that showed up the very next day so no one connected to the school has to think very hard about how to get a hot meal; like the teams from all over the country which are bringing in therapy dogs for kids to hug; and

³ Ibid.

it's in the Parkland survivors, who continue to organize and advocate for legal measures to put an end to these mass shootings.

As God did for Paul and Silas, God will hear our prayers and provoke us to act – IF we are able to quiet ourselves down enough to listen. There was a great deal of conversation online on Tuesday to the effect that "thoughts and prayers" are not enough. Action *should* come from those prayers – if there is nothing else that Acts 16 teaches us, it's that's how it happens from God's end of things, even when it happens in God's own time and way. May we be brave enough to listen to the Spirit that is nudging us to take it, and stand with the kids who are telling us the truth about how they are being killed to say that enough is enough.