

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

May 29, 2022

Psalm 97

Acts 16:16-34

LIBERATING POWER

What do you find annoying? And what level of annoyance does it have to reach before you take action? The Apostle Paul carried out an act of ministry on behalf of a girl. The Book of Acts tells us he did so because he was motivated by his annoyance with what sounds like the girl's compulsive behavior. Paul and his ministry team had recently come to Philippi to proclaim the gospel, with the hope of establishing a church there. The group happened to meet a girl described as having a spirit that would enable her to be a fortuneteller. This girl was held as a slave by those who made money off her special abilities. We're not told her age, but she is described as a girl, not as a young woman. This slave-girl was focused on Paul and his group to the extent that she followed them around while crying 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. Paul gets described as being very much annoyed, which leads him in the name of Jesus Christ to cast out the oppressive spirit within the girl that gave her the fortunetelling abilities.

He did the right thing for what sounds like the wrong reason. I wish his motivation had been to free the girl from the oppressive system of slavery she was under. But, instead, it sounds like he acted because he was annoyed with her behavior, as she for many days, kept shouting, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Sometimes, our motives are better than our actions. Occasionally, our actions are better than our motives. But maybe, the girl's words annoyed Paul because they pricked his conscience as she yelled about their proclaiming a way of salvation for others, that didn't at that point include anything that would save her from her oppressive situation. Perhaps, her words annoyed Paul because she talked about them proclaiming this message, and Paul knew that when Jesus proclaimed the message of salvation that he did so in both word and deed in ways that benefited them presently and in the future. So, Paul,

finally, in the name of Jesus Christ, casts out or exorcises the spirit that inhabited the girl.

But with the girl now free of the spirit that enabled her to be a fortuneteller, she could no longer make money for those who owned her. These slave owners had no interest in the wellbeing of the girl; they just wanted the money to keep flowing through this oppressive system that benefitted them. They evidently had not cared that a religious message was being proclaimed in their town of Philippi until that religious message got practiced in a way that interrupted the flow of money that was coming to them. And then, they got more than annoyed – they got mad enough to seize Paul and his partner, Silas, drag them before the town judicial officials, and claim they were outsiders who were disturbing the peace. They enflame mob violence against them. The magistrates decide to have Paul and Silas beaten and thrown into prison for proclaiming and carrying out their faith in a way that interrupted their oppressive economic system.

Is there anything in this story that sounds familiar to us? There are monied interests who disregard the wellbeing not of just one child, but of children across this country. It has gotten to the point that according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that gunshot wounds are now the most common cause of death for children and youth in this country. ¹ There are companies that make billions of dollars selling weapons of war to American civilians, some of whom are annoyed or mad or insane enough to go into a school and kill a bunch of children and teachers, or into a grocery store and kill a bunch of grandparents. ² These companies give millions of dollars to people in power to try to ensure that the flow of money through the sales of AR15s won't be interrupted. ³

The story from the Book of Acts continues. Paul and Silas are put in stocks in prison, but that doesn't keep them from praying and singing unto God, even when things seem so very bleak in the middle of the night. An earthquake suddenly comes that shakes the very foundation of the prison so that locked doors fly open and chains that held the prisoners in captivity break open. It seemed like a God with liberating power was at work. When the jailer wakes up and sees that the prison doors are wide open, he is about to commit suicide, based on beliefs that were not true, that the prisoners had all escaped. But Paul and Silas call out to him

to let him know they were still there. They had not run off. They were not willing to pursue their own rights and embrace their freedom to act without taking into consideration how that might impact the life of another. Out of the power of their caring witness, the jailer soon is washing the wounds Paul and Silas suffered from being beaten. They then wash the jailer's woundedness with the waters of baptism as he along with his family is liberated from the system of oppression and despair in which he had been caught to explore new faith and hope.

Paul and Silas stopped him from committing suicide. Many of the gun deaths that occur in our society are suicides, based on beliefs that are not true, that no one cares for them and there is no way out of what has them feeling so much despair, as well as the untrue belief that the presence of guns makes us all safer.

It is Memorial Day weekend. It is fitting for us to honor the memory of those who gave their lives defending our country from external enemies who wanted to use weapons of war against American civilians. But there are also internal enemies who for whatever reason want weapons of war to use against civilians. It is somewhat difficult for a teenager to get a driver's license in our country because it is a matter of public safety. Why is it easier for a teenager to buy a weapon of war along with hundreds of rounds of ammunition than it is to get a driver's license? Mohandas Gandhi, the great moral teacher who led the independence movement for India, identified seven deadly sins that affected public life, the last three of the seven being "politics without principle, commerce without morality, and worship without sacrifice."⁴ Deadly indeed!

I know there are those who think it unwise to discuss issues of public policy in church, that it can lead to discord within the church. Yet if the church is silent on what are clearly moral issues, then we are actually strengthening the status quo, the systems that are in place that are leading to the deaths of innocent people. The church is one of the few places in our society where people with differing views come together and can talk in a civil and respectful non-partisan manner with one another so we can make informed choices for action as individuals or perhaps as a faith community. Our story in the Book of Acts as well as other scripture describes salvation that involves liberation in this life as well as the salvation of eternal life beyond this life. Proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ involves more than

words. It also calls for caring and transformative action. If the gospel is not relevant to life and death issues gripping our society, it is not really good news.

My wife, Nancy, our son, Jordan, and I went to a rally organized by a non-profit called Cease Fire, held at a synagogue on Friday. The governor and other politicians spoke. Various faith leaders, including a Presbyterian pastor friend of this congregation, Adan Marena, spoke. But the most powerful statement in my mind came from two middle school aged girls who told the hundreds in attendance, “Teachers and students should be able to come to work every day and not worrying for their safety. We are scared, frustrated, and exhausted. We want to live our lives, free of gun violence.” They didn’t yell like the girl in the story in Acts. Their words did not annoy me. Rather, the words of these girls pricked my conscience. I dare say the children and youth in our congregation also want us to take action on their behalf. It is annoying to me that many politicians and others in response to another mass shooting offer little more than an expression of their thoughts and prayers. I think our response as people of faith should be thoughtful, figuring out what works against gun violence so much better in every other country in the world than in ours. I think we should be prayerful, lifting up those families and communities that have been devastated by gun violence, but also seeking God’s guidance about actions we could take.

My conscience has gotten pricked with the realization that I often work to change very minor things that are annoying me more quickly than I work to change big things that literally are killing thousands of innocent people. I’m annoyed by that realization. I hope it is an annoyance that might get me more involved in some kind of positive preventive action. If you are also annoyed by such things, I would invite you to join with me. Who knows what our God who has such liberating powers might do even through our actions in response to an annoyance? God certainly has done it before.

¹ <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/26/gun-deaths-children-america>

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/26/tallying-americas-fascination-with-ar-15-style-rifles/>

³ <https://elections.bradyunited.org/take-action/nra-donations-116th-congress-senators>

⁴ <https://www.gandhiashramsevagram.org/seven-deadly-sins/index.php>