

5-29-2022 Sermon "Disturbing the City"

I've shared with you before that my undergraduate degree was in Political Science.

My minor was in Criminology and one of the required courses for that field of study was on *Correctional Institutions*.

And as part of that class we both studied and visited various jails and prisons in and around Indiana, sites that separately housed men, women, and juvenile offenders, including the U.S. Federal Penitentiary in Terre Haute, a maximum security facility that a few years later would number among its inmates, Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, who would eventually face execution in that prison for his heinous crimes.

And I have to tell you, if you have never been inside the walls of a maximum security facility like that - which I assume applies to most of you here - there is something unnerving about walking in there for the first time and hearing those large metal doors clang shut behind you as you face the taunts and jeers of inmates who have nothing to lose and little reason to be concerned about the effects of their words or their behaviors.

As you are led around the facility by a Corrections Office as though you were touring a house for sale, you can only begin to comprehend the magnitude of what you are in the midst of.

It is mind-blowing to say the least.

The Pew Research Center, an internationally known and respected research organization, reports that in 2019, the United States, *the land of the free and home of the brave*, imprisoned more people than any other country in the world - more than China, more than Russia, more than any other where in the world.

In fact, not only are the raw numbers of prisoners higher, but the incarceration rate - the number of imprisoned as a percentage of the total population was also the highest in the world.

25% of all people incarcerated in the entire world are imprisoned in the United States.

And according to The Innocence Project, approximately 1% of the current prison population have been wrongfully convicted.

Now 1% might not seem like many, but with a prison population of 2.2 million in the U.S.,- 4 times the number imprisoned in China, by the way - 1% is 22,000 innocent people who are wrongly incarcerated in our nation alone. Thought of another way, that is greater than the total capacity for either Value City Arena or Nationwide Arena. And while some think 1% is a "reasonable" margin of error, you would think differently about it if that 1% included your family member or loved one.

Had these two groups been around and doing this kind of research in the first century, then Paul and Silas would have been included in their numbers of both incarcerated and wrongly convicted.

While still in Macedonia and still staying in the home of Lydia, whom we met last week, Paul and Silas encounter a woman who is in a different kind of prison.

Two different kinds of prison in fact.

First, she is a slave. That is, she is owned by two men and considered property.

And second, she is possessed by a spirit.

Being the good entrepreneurial capitalists that these slave owners are, they have turned this woman's misfortune into an opportunity to make money.

This spirit that possesses her enables her to foretell the future and she somehow recognizes that Paul and Silas are, as she put it, "slaves to the most high God," and that they are "proclaiming a way of salvation."

And this woman, for whatever reason, follows Paul and Silas around, shouting out this message, stealing their thunder as it were, until eventually Paul has had enough and exorcises the spirit from her.

And while initially this would seem like good news, we really can't be sure.

You see, we never hear any more about her.

She's freed from a spirit but not from her slavery.

And now what was likely her most marketable skill has been taken from her.

What happened to her after this story is left to the imagination, but nearly all of the possible scenarios are not good.

At the same time, her slave owners, realizing that their money-making-machine has been taken from them, go crying to the authorities.

But do they tell the truth about what happened?

Of course not!

They change the narrative, reporting instead that Paul and Silas, as Jews, are disturbing this Roman city and its customs and practices - no mention of the impact on their personal finances.

And so the authorities have the two arrested, they are stripped naked in order to humiliate them, they are beaten severely in order to punish them, and then they are thrown into the first century equivalent of solitary confinement.

Add two more to the total of wrongly convicted.

And the story continues that at midnight that night, while Paul and Silas are singing hymns and praying, a mighty earthquake "unfastened" the shackles of all the prisoners who were being held.

That's an interesting detail isn't it?

It doesn't say that the earthquake broke their shackles, or that the walls of the prison crumbled or anything like that, but that their shackles were "unfastened."

Now, one pastor at the Festival of Homiletics last week approached this passage from the point of view of the the jail keeper who, thinking all of the prisoners had escaped, was preparing to take his own life rather than face either the wrath of his superiors or of the newly-freed prisoners. But that pastor's message was written and delivered **before** the shootings in Texas this week that killed 19 children and 2 adults.

That changes the lens through which we must look at this week's scripture.

BREAK

There are so many potential sermons in this passage from Acts that it was almost hard to decide where to begin or which way to go.

But in light of those tragic shootings in Texas it would almost be ministerial malpractice to not examine this passage, at least in part, through the lens of that event.

And one of the first things we might need to consider in looking at these two issues - the passage from Acts and yet another mass shooting - is where do we see people imprisoned, either literally or metaphorically - in the conjunction of these events?

While Paul and Silas are literally imprisoned, neither for the first nor the last times in their ministry, this slave woman - as we explored earlier - was also imprisoned was she not?

And what about the slave owners?

Couldn't you say that they were somehow enslaved to both a personal economic outcome that depended on the productivity of somebody else, as well as to both a mindset and society that said it was okay to enslave another human being in order to profit from their labors? And what of the magistrates who, wanting peace and quiet more than justice, were willing to inflict physical harm and imprison two individuals with little or no real investigation into the accusations brought against them? And then there's the jail keeper, who is locked into this mentality that says it would be better to take his own life rather than trust his fate to either his superiors or the prisoners when he initially believes the prisoners have all escaped?

And so, reflecting theologically on all this, that leads us to wonder, what are the things that imprison us?

Besides the statistics I shared from the Pew Research Center and the Innocence Project earlier about actual, physical incarceration in our country, what are the things which hold us prisoner outside of the correctional system itself?

Is it addiction from which you need to be set free?

Alcohol, drugs, or sex addiction?

Or maybe it's an addiction to pornography or violence that has you behind mental or emotional bars?

For some people it's greed and the need to accumulate more and more, especially at the expense of others, that has them shackled.

For others - as we touched on in Lent - it's a mindset or belief that they are not enough, not **good** enough, not **attractive** enough, not **smart** enough...just not **enough**.

For still others the chains that bind them are an ideology, political or otherwise, or perhaps a theology that tells them there is only one way to think, to believe, to pray, or whatever it may be.

Or maybe you are imprisoned by the biases, the judgment, or the fear of others because you have been “othered” by them.

Somehow, somehow, all of us are held captive to or by one or more of these things, or something similar to them.

All of us need to be set free.

At the same time, we have to also consider, when are we not the prisoner, but the jailer?

When I was in Denver last week I became acutely aware of the presence of those who are imprisoned by mental illness as I walked the downtown streets and witnessed people who needed more help than society was offering.

Whether it was the man I saw carrying on a knock-down drag out fight with a telephone pole, or another man who was lying on a street corner pounding himself mercilessly in the face and head with his fists, these people were clearly in a prison the likes of which most of us have never experienced.

And I think we have to assume, on some level at least, that Salvador Ramos, the eighteen-year-old mass killer in Texas this week, was in some kind of prison like this as well.

But he wasn't alone.

Our nation used to have much better funding for mental health care than we do today.

We used to have facilities for longterm care for mentally ill patients that are not as readily available today.

In the early 1980s Congress and the Administration decided to federal cut funding for much of mental health care and closed many of those mental health care facilities, turning tens of thousands of seriously mentally ill people out onto the streets.

I understand, many of those facilities were not good, they needed reform, but they were better, I would argue, than the alternative.

Many, many of those people have ended up in the corrections systems at all levels of government where they are treated as criminals and not patients, and many of them are among the vast number of unhoused in our country.

Similarly we are imprisoned, as a nation and by politicians and special interest groups to be honest with you, in a culture that proclaims loudly, over and over again, that the uninhibited right to own guns is more important than the right of some people to live.

Especially vulnerable people, children, people of color...

Our nation is imprisoned by a mindset, an ideology, a special interest, a monied interest, an **evil** that is willing to allow, not only the mass incarceration I spoke of before, but also mass shootings, mass killings to take place on a regular basis.

It's an evil we could renounce by holding to account our elected officials, our legislators at the state and federal levels, if we had the will to do so.

But like those slave owners in our reading for today, those who are beholden to this mindset change the narrative, and every time some politician stands up and demands “common sense gun laws,” those who profit from the status quo respond with “they want to take away your guns.”

And so we we talk and weep about another massive loss of innocent life, the sycophants offer their meaningless “thoughts and prayers,” - code for “we’re not going to do anything about this...**again**” - and nothing changes. In this so-called “Christian nation” nothing changes; nothing Christ-like happens.

BREAK

With this baptism today, Alexander is the 8th child we have baptized so far this year.

And for each of these worship services in which we have joined together in the sacrament of baptism, we have repeated together the vows of the baptismal sacrament that are also part of our membership vows in Christ's church.

We just said them again a little while ago, remember?

*On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:*

*Do you **renounce** the spiritual forces of wickedness, **reject** the evil powers of this world, and **repent** of your sin?*

And either today or sometime in the past we all said, **I do.**

And then next we asked,

*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you  
to **resist** evil, injustice, and oppression  
in whatever forms they present themselves?*

And again, we responded, **I do.**

And then finally we asked,

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,  
put your whole trust in his grace,  
and promise to serve him as your Lord,  
in union with the Church which Christ has opened  
to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

And for a third time, we responded, **I do.**

And I guess in light of the events of this past week, and through the lens of our scriptures for this week and the past couple of weeks, I guess we need to ask, when we responded with “I do” three times, were we responding more like the frightened disciple Peter when he was denying Jesus, or was it more like when Jesus was offering him the opportunity to redeem himself by asking Peter three times if he loved him? Hmmmm.

Or put differently, when we take and repeat these vows, do we take them seriously, do we mean what we say, or do we mindlessly mouth these words, lip-syncing our faith so that we have the appearance of disciples of Jesus Christ but not the substance?

“Pastor,” some will moan, “you’re getting too political. This is not the place for politics. Jesus was not political.”

And I suggest to you that if you think Jesus was not political then you haven't read the Bible.

Jesus was **very** political - what Jesus was **not** was partisan.

And the killing of our children is not a partisan issue - or at least it shouldn't be.

If this abdication of responsibility for the safety of our children by our politicians is not one of the "spiritual forces of wickedness" or "evil powers of this world," then nothing is.

And if our abdication of **our** responsibility by continuing to elect officials who turn their blind eyes away from our children and toward those who profit by the sales of the instruments of their death, is not sin, then nothing is.

We dare not call ourselves Christian - as individuals or as a nation - when, having "accepted the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves..." we continue to allow the mass slaughter of the innocents of our society in the name of personal rights.

Let me say that again: we dare not call ourselves Christian - as individuals or as a nation - when we allow the mass slaughter of the innocents of our society in the name of personal rights.

I don't know what your beliefs are, but I do not believe in Hell as a place to which God sends some people or souls after death if they don't believe or pray the right way or say the right words.

I believe that idea of Hell is totally inconsistent with the nature of God as love that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

I believe Hell is something we experience here on earth during this lifetime.

And if you don't believe me, you need look no further than that small town in Texas, where 22 families are in a living Hell right now that could have been prevented if more Christians in this so-called Christian nation had truly chosen to **live** into **their** baptisms.

May God forgive us. Amen.