

Do-Gooders and Trouble-Makers
Lessons: John 17:20-26, ACTS 16:16-24

Paul and Silas were on their way to the place of prayer in Philippi when they cast out a demon from a fortune teller. It caused an uproar in the city. One test of whether or not a church is faithful to Christ's work in a community is pretty clear: sooner or later a town will think those do-gooders are turning into trouble-makers.

Demon possession is one of the real problems for us in scripture. In the modern world, we think of mental illness more than demons. We tend to avoid many of the miracles in the Bible that our modern views find hard to understand. The New Testament does not share our worldview or our problems with demons. It's focus is still something we can share. Scripture shows us two common elements from Jesus' experience with people troubled with spirits: 1) the spirit controls a person so that they say and do things that are not them; they are "possessed" or enslaved by a power; and 2) when that power speaks, it recognizes the power of God. The miracle becomes a sign of Jesus' power as God, because in the end the demon obeys the higher power.

Now we are ready to read an encounter that Paul has with a slave girl possessed by a demon.

Acts: 16:16-19 – One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry 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. 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.

Look what *really* happens here:

1) Paul and Silas are followers of Jesus and evangelists in a pagan city to a number of people who are God-worshippers, probably Jews and converted pagans.

2) A demon or spirit in a slave girl accuses Paul and Silas of being "slaves of the Most High God," and in reality they are. They are bound to obedience to Christ. They are in Philippi because God has led them there through a dream and a call to Macedonia.

3) Here is the important point: Paul and Silas are focused on doing God's work – looking for places where God is working – so they recognize the opportunity of a badgering girl as a chance to demonstrate the power of the Most High God. Jesus did signs and wonders and cast out demons. They can, too.

4) The girl is a slave to her owners but even more to the spirit, and she is "freed" from her possession to both by Paul and Silas – just like people who were enslaved and possessed were freed by Jesus Christ.

5) Paul and Silas heal her in the same way Jesus healed, and show all the pagans and worshippers of God that they are followers of the Most High God – the One God who they know as Jesus Christ.

Their one mission is to demonstrate the love and power of Jesus Christ to change lives – in the same way that Jesus Christ had changed their lives. Paul and Silas are miracle-workers, because they appropriate the power of the living Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. The spirit of Christ transforms the life of this girl enslaved to powers beyond her control. She is set free from her slavery to owners and demons, too.

How do we bring a miracle of casting out demons into the 21st Century? Where do we find people today who are enslaved, who say and do things that are not them? What are the spirits who speak with power today, and still recognize God as a higher power when they are confronted?

“The Great Ends of the Church” in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) say, “...the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”

When we look at events like this one in Acts, we might say that Paul and Silas were the first Presbyterians. They were slaves to the Great Ends of the Most High God. ...Not really. What we can say is that throughout our history, we have worked at the same things Paul and Silas did for the same reasons they did them.

Some parts of the church go a different direction than our Great Ends. Some traditions of church have tried to reject the world and worry only about heaven. Some have confused the goods defined by a society or government or even an organization with the will of God, and they become a church of the world. But Presbyterians have generally said we are called to be “in the world, but not of the world.” We mean more than just living in the world and being different from the world.

In all of our world, we are called to be followers. We do not mindlessly go along with the world. We see ourselves as called to make this world look more like God’s world. Like Paul and Silas, we address the world – even the demonic powers with the voice of the Most High God. We believe that Christ’s Spirit is at work all around us, and we are called to be followers that do God’s will. Hopefully, people may even see us as slaves of God rather than slaves to other powers that control the lives of people, or communities, or nations, or even cultures.

Presbyterians are always trying to change the world. Presbyterians have always had the reputation as “do-gooders.” Our congregations are generally in the lead when it comes to involvement in the community, people who serve on boards, people who try to extend the great ends of the church into the great ends of an organization or a workplace of a town or even a culture. People see our names in the paper as teachers in schools or business leaders or serving on the board of some civic association all the time. We are in the world, doing good.

Paul and Silas remind us of something that we sometimes forget. We do not take our Christian hats off when we serve other places. We are not witnesses to Christ if we forget that we work for Christ in the work we do in civic or cultural life. We are slaves of the Most High God who shapes the way we serve in other places. We are always trying to transform the world, change our communities, make them more like Christ would want them to be. We see through

Christ eyes, we look for opportunities to do work Christ did, we try to influence the way organizations and governments act so that they please God.

We work in the world the way Christ worked in his world. We ask where Jesus would be, and we go there. That is why Presbyterian Church has always been more involved with the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the mentally ill, the sick in a community. We look for the slaves who are controlled by other powers – sometimes demonic – and we go there. Presbyterians start food pantries, work at homeless shelters, volunteer with hospice or at hospitals, tutor children and run senior centers. We promote right living in a society, and demonstrate the rule of the Most High God named Jesus Christ is to be in the places that need transforming. By our witness, we call on a culture to worry about real problems the way Christ sees problems. We live in the world by the Great Ends of the church.

We are followers of Christ in the world. We are always looking for what God is doing, just like Paul and Silas were that day. Whenever we do Christ's work, we run into the risk of being called "do-gooders," and sooner or later we get branded as "trouble-makers."

Acts 16:19-26 – 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. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "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." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. 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. 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.

Look what happens sometimes when you become a do-gooder.

Paul and Silas got in trouble because they were "advocating customs that were not lawful" – oh, and by the way, they offended the slave owners who saw that "their hope of making money was gone."

Paul and Silas got in trouble because their "great ends" collided with the great ends of the powers who were content to enslave and use people for their ends. They got put in jail for healing a slave girl. No, they got put way-out-of-the-way so they would not be able to advocate changes in the customs or take money out of someone's pocket.

How does this work for us? Well, maybe we are supposed to be like Paul and Silas and keep our eyes open to the ways Christ would see a problem. We might define a problem in a new way, and our solution might cause some trouble.

I had not been at the Presbyterian Church in Boerne three months when the local newspaper ran an article quoting a civic leader that there were "no hungry people in Kendall County unless they were lazy."

I had several church members in my office the next week. Within three months, a coalition of some of the churches had opened a food pantry. We announced that we would start distributing one bag of groceries on the first Friday and Saturday of every month. After the first weekend, the weekly newspaper carried a front page photo of some of the 127 families who had stood in line for one bag of groceries. Oh, and there was a letter to the editor about how much trouble the churches had started by helping the poor people.

Churches see life differently and define needs differently, and most of the time being do-gooders means that we become trouble-makers to somebody. Like Paul and Silas, we don't focus much on the trouble we might cause, because we have our commitment to being followers and we are focused on where Christ is at work so we can work with Christ. If it does cost us something to do some good, ...well, people who are slaves to powers have paid more than we will ever pay. And Christ wants to heal them and give them new life. If we bear some cost, it probably won't be a jail cell – and it surely won't be a cross.

When we keep focused on the Great Ends of the One who is the Most High God, we can always look back on the history of our tradition and see the ways that God has done miracles through the dedication and faithfulness of our heritage. We can celebrate transforming places and changing lives and saving the least of these who are the slaves of powers of all kinds.

When we know God is working in our world, when we look for God. We feel the earth shaking and doors opening and chains unfastening around us. We see God doing some miraculous things that some would never believe could happen. We realize that Christ not only has power to heal, feed, cloth, teach, protect and comfort right here and now. We are in worship instead of jail. But we pray and sing hymns and see Christ's work and do it, and we celebrate the grace that sets us free, too!