

Disturbing the City

May 29, 2022

Acts 16:16-34

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." 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 are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as 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.

²⁵ 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.

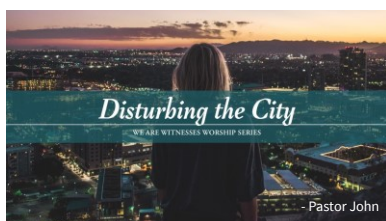
²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They answered, “Believe on 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.

John 17:20-23

²⁰ “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.



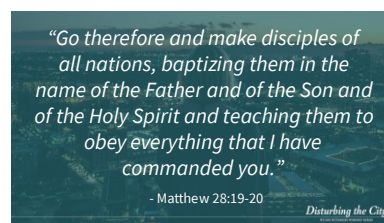
As we begin this time together, journey back with me to childhood. Growing up, did you have an annoying little brother or sister? If you did, think back and recall what made them so annoying. Was it that they always wanted to tag along, to always be with the older kids – with you and your friends? Or was it that your younger sibling kept mom and dad informed? Or... were you the annoying little brother or sister?

As we come to a close in our “We Are Witnesses” worship series, we turn to the idea of disturbing the city. Our Christian witness should make us stand out in today’s modern culture. Our faithful walk should draw attention from a world that pursues and chases after the latest, greatest, biggest, and newest. Our obedience to God and to the life that we are called to live as followers of Jesus Christ should stand out from the me-first and self-centered ways of the world. If we truly live out our Methodist witness, closely connected to our mission to make disciples for the transformation of the world, then we will be people who disturb the city, the state, the nation, and the world. Sounds like fun, doesn’t it? Well, maybe for some. As we prepare to spend this time together, let us begin with a word of prayer...

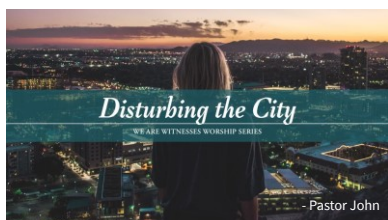
In Matthew 28, Jesus gave the disciples this commission:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy

Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” From the time of his ascension, the early church sought to live out this mission. Peter, John, and the other disciples were joined by Paul, Timothy, and other apostles and followers of Jesus, taking the good news of Jesus Christ out into the known world. Everywhere they went they told others about the love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, and life-changing power of Christ. Followers of Christ went far and wide, teaching and sharing a better way of living – the way of Christ. Key to their teaching was Jesus’ focus on loving God and loving neighbor. They lived this focus out by offering self as a humble servant. The early church was most known for its love. The ways that the church loved God and, in turn, others was the main thing that drew people towards a relationship with Christ. During the early days, the church was radically different than society. People noticed.

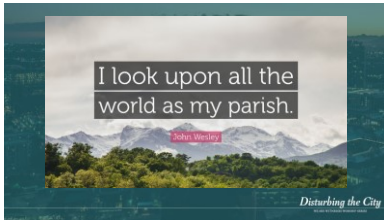


At some point, as the centuries rolled by, many churches became another version of society. By the Middle Ages, the church was one of the most powerful institutions in the world. The church owned vast tracts of land and controlled much in the world of politics – from influencing decisions to affecting the appointments to political offices in many places. It was at the peak of the church’s power that the Reformation began, drawing the church back towards the teachings and ways of Jesus. This disturbing of



the city shook Rome and the religious establishment. Protestant denominations formed, leading to many changes that brought believers once again into alignment with Jesus and his way of living.

But two hundred years later, in many places the church remained a private church, a church for the upper classes. Although King Henry VIII established the Anglican Church in England as a way to separate from the Catholic power base in Rome, little changed. The Anglican church remained a church for the educated and the wealthy. John Wesley, our Methodist founder, called for another reformation of the church – one that would welcome the uneducated and the oppressed, the poor and the downtrodden. As you could probably imagine, this reform was not welcomed by the powers that be in the Anglican Church and soon Wesley found himself banned. To the Anglican Church, he was that annoying little brother or sister, the one that kept telling them how they should act. He found himself on the outside looking in. That did not bother Wesley one bit. During his lifetime Wesley taught in fields and mines, on street corners and in factories, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to a world in need. He visited prisons and brought clothes and food to the poorest of the poor. To reach and elevate the masses, Wesley started orphanages and hospitals, schools and meeting houses.



John Wesley once said, “I look upon all the world as my parish.” Day after day he sought to live out these words. The Methodist movement soon gave way to the Methodist church, which retained Wesley’s passion for those on the

edges, for those not welcomed in most of the more traditional and established churches. The mission statement of the United Methodist Church reflects Wesley’s passion to share Jesus with the world. Our United Methodist

mission statement reads: “Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” This mission

statement reflects well the original commission Jesus gave

the disciples: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”* When we teach others to obey, to live the way of Jesus, it transforms lives, and it transforms the world. No doubt about it.



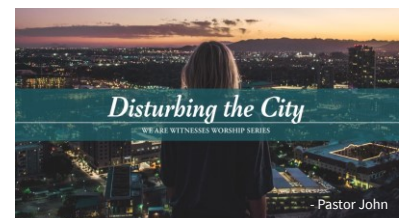
The transformation of lives was at the center of our main passages these past two

weeks. In both passages, there was a certain amount of disturbing going on too. Two weeks ago, we heard about the vision that led to Peter preaching Christ resurrected in a Gentile home. This disturbed the church leaders back in

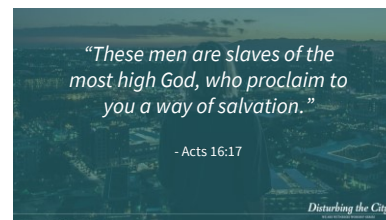
Jerusalem. Yet Cornelius and his household received Christ as Lord and were

baptized. Last week, Paul shared the good news of Jesus Christ and Lydia, and her

household came to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. Turn with me to Acts 16 as Paul and Silas continue on in Philippi, sharing the gospel of Jesus.

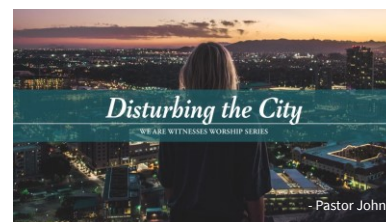


As our passage begins Paul, Luke, and others are once again going to a place of prayer. Along the way they meet a slave girl with a special gift. She had a *“spirit of divination”* – she could tell fortunes. This was quite profitable for her owners. Using this gift, the slave girl proclaims, *“These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* Day after day, *“These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* Day after day, *“These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* Day after day, *“These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* Day after day. Remember that annoying little brother or sister? She was that, but on steroids.



Although she speaks the truth, Paul couldn’t even begin to share the good news – not with her constant chatter. Over and over, day after day, *“These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”* And then Paul cracked. Being *“very much annoyed,”* Paul turns upon her and speaks to the spirit inside of her, saying, *“I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.”* The spirit left immediately, right along with all the profits that her owners had so enjoyed.

In the next few verses, we see the slave girl’s owner’s reaction. They had Paul and Silas arrested. Dragging them before the city leaders, they say, *“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 joins in too. Paul and Silas are stripped naked, beaten, and then thrown into jail. The jailer locks them in shackles in the innermost cell in the prison.



Beaten and bloody, humiliated and persecuted, Paul and Silas sulk and pout. No! They pray and sing hymns to God. Talk about a witness. Stripped, beaten, thrown in jail... and they pray and sing hymns to God.

What went through their minds as they found themselves in this circumstance?

Perhaps the words of Psalm 97 came to mind. In our lectionary readings for this week, we find this Psalm. Maybe the words of verses 10 and 11 came to mind for Paul and Silas: *“God guards the lives of his faithful... rescues them from the hand of the wicked. Light dawns for the righteous and joy for the upright in heart.”* Maybe these words encouraged them and brought them some hope as they sat shackled in this hopeless jail cell. In moments like this, it is important to recall God’s promises.

Apparently, their prayers and songs reached that God most high. The foundations of the city are shaken. Cell doors fly open, and shackles fall off wrists and ankles. The jailer wakes up and draws his sword, about to take his own life. His life would be the price for allowing prisoners to escape. Hearing the sword drawn, Paul calls out, *“Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.”* No one has gone anywhere. Put away your sword. Calling for lights and rushing to that innermost cell, the jailer brings them outside and asks Paul and Silas, *“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”* What must I do to have what you have? The answer is simple: *““Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”* That is what the jailer does. He and his entire family are baptized, and they rejoice about becoming believers. Transformation came to the jailer’s house. Paul and Silas’ faithful witness changed hearts and lives.

What was it that allowed Paul and Silas to pray and sing hymns to God in that cell that night? What gave them the courage and the trust to turn once again to God, even though their proclamation of Jesus had brought humiliation and abuse and had landed them in jail? Their trust in God allowed them to persevere. Their faith in the vision from God set them on this course and they believed in God's plan.

As Paul and Silas walked out of that cell and back into the world, the last words of Psalm 97 probably came to mind: *"Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous, and give thanks to his holy name!"* Miraculously freed and given opportunity to witness to one who had been their adversary just hours before – certainly reason to rejoice and praise God. Once again, their faith and trust and obedience bore fruit, making more disciples for the transformation of the world.

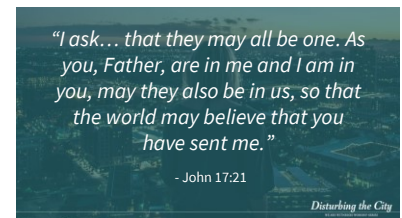
Now, turn with me to John 17 as we seek to understand what allowed Paul and Silas to remain grounded in their faith and to remain connected to what guided them through this time of hardship. Our portion of John 17 comes towards the end of Jesus' prayer for his disciples. Just prior to our verses for today, Jesus prays, *"Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."* Jesus asks God to ground the disciples in his words, in the truths that he spoke, as they are sent out into the world.



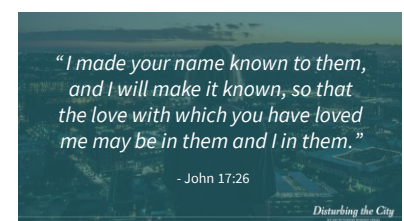
In our passage for today, Jesus prays not just for the disciples but for *"those who will believe in me through their word."* Jesus is praying for Paul and Silas and for you and for me.

The words of the disciples, the words that echoed Jesus, have poured down through the ages. Spoken by Peter and John, spoken by Paul and Silas, spoken by many other faithful followers of Jesus – these words of Jesus have poured down through the ages, arriving at last upon our hearts. In turn, we are charged with carrying these words on, with sharing the same good news of Jesus Christ with the world, seeking to transform this world through Christ's love.

Beginning in verse 21, Jesus begins to pray for unity. Here Jesus prays, *"I ask... that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."* Jesus and God are one. Jesus asks that the disciples be added to that mix - so the world may believe. The road will not be easy – just look at what happened to Paul and Silas in our Acts text for today. So, Jesus prays for unity, because through unity the gospel will be proclaimed. Unity remains an important part of the church. The connection to God, to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to one another is essential for a church to grow and to make new disciples.

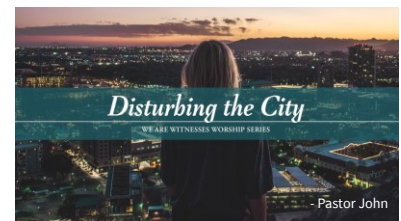


Moving a little past what we read for this morning, in verse 26, we gain insight into what it is that builds and maintains the unity and connection that is so needed in the church. Here Jesus says, *"I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them."* Love. It is love that allows for connection and unity. It is Jesus' love in our hearts that brings connection and unity.



It is love that can move us past conflict and disagreement and into spaces where the priority of making disciples for the transformation of the world can come to the forefront. It is the reason that we exist as a church. It is the reason that we are disciples of Jesus Christ. It is love that can transform lives and our world.

Today we desire to hold up a vision that inspires us and encourages others to come alongside us. We strive to build the kingdom here, in this place. As a church, we invite all people, from our eldest to the next generation, to join us in building a kingdom of love, in making the world more into what God designed it to be. We know that change is hard, that it will be resisted. It will disturb our cities. Yet we are called to be change makers, to be change bringers. We will be resisted, and ignored, and maybe even persecuted – much like Paul and Silas. Yet we will persist; we will bring change, bring a new kin-dom, a new way of living as the human community. May it be so for us all this week. Amen and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What signs of disunity do you see in the community of faith? How can we work together to live into the unity that God calls Grace to practice?
- 2) *Pray*. After the earthquake, the jailer washed Paul and Silas' wounds – wounds that he may have made – as a sign of repentance. What acts or words can we offer to those we have harmed, directly or indirectly?
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 17:35-40. Why do you think Paul insists that the magistrates come and let them out of jail? When had standing for or speaking truth in your life helped those in power to see the right or better way?