

When Prophets and Profits Collide

Acts 16:16-26

Rev. Raphael G. Warnock

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“And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a slave girl met us who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She made a large profit for her owners by fortune-telling. As she followed Paul and us, she cried out, ‘These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God’. She did this for many days. Paul was greatly annoyed. Turning to the spirit, he said, ‘I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!’ And it came out right away. ***When her owners realized that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities.*** Bringing them before the chief magistrates, they said, ‘These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice’. The crowd joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had severely flogged them, they threw them into jail, ordering the jailer to guard them carefully. Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured 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 such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s chains came loose.”

Sermon Summary

Paul and Silas are actively engaged in the work they are called to do. Whatever you do, make sure to do what God tells you to do. Don’t limit the prophetic voice to the pulpit, but all God’s people are called to the prophetic community - the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is the Gospel? It is God’s good news to the poor who seek liberation, and the poor in spirit who need transformation in a broken and unjust world. The Gospel will cost you something: your time, resources, etc. Therefore, Jesus calls us to deny ourselves and follow him. Paul and Silas’ commitment to the gospel lead them to Rome where they preached and prophesied God’s word. Prophecy means to see God’s truth in a situation. We can understand what they are doing, by embracing Jesus’ call to all believers to preach good news to the poor and heal the sick.

Paul and Silas’ encounter with the slave girl with a spirit of divination, shows us we should expect opposition when we commit to sharing God’s word. She followed them all over town, heckling, distracting, and interrupting them, repeating everything they said, over and over. She was not in control of herself because of this spirit. She had a gift but she wasn’t in control of her gift, rather her owners controlled her. How awful is it for people to not be in control of their own gifts, talents, their own selves. She was dealing with possession and oppression. She was a young girl who was marginalized and enslaved. Her gifts belong to the exploitive masters and were being used for ill gain.

Paul gets tired and annoyed by heckling and decides to do something about it. He spoke to the spirit and commanded it come out in the name above all names, Jesus. He didn’t ask for anything in return, but commanded her to live free in Jesus’ name. She was set free immediately. She was found, she could now

see; she was confused and broken but when God's word came into her life, she was made whole and healed.

While this should have led to rejoicing by the town, it did the opposite. Because she was enslaved to others, and contributed to their wealth, we see the devastating outcome of selfishness and greed that so often pervades our communities. Her gift was their gig, and now that they can no longer exploit her for their own personal gain, they seek to demonize the good that Paul and Silas had done. They became frustrated with the girl's newfound freedom and wanted to punish those who interfered with their evil schemes. When you are accustomed to privilege, equity can feel like oppression. Thus, we see three things happen when prophets collide with profits, as the evil slave owners pursue the protection of their profits that serve as warning signs for us to heed.

1. Assertion of propaganda

- a. In order for evil deeds to be looked upon favorably, you have to make the good deeds look worse. In order to justify their cause, the slave owners had to make Paul and Silas the enemy, not only to them individually, but to the entire town. Their individual misfortune had to become the misfortune of everyone else.
- b. They generate a narrative to the leaders of the town that Paul and Silas are different, which means they are dangerous; they are not like us, Romans, they are Jews, they are the 'other'. They come from a different place, even though you can be Jewish and Roman, such as Paul was. What they preach is not acceptable or practiced in our city, they have to be condemned.

2. Ambitions of Politicians

- a. The leaders throw Paul and Silas in jail. Every system of oppression exists because someone is benefiting, financially. Basic protections are politicized because someone's pockets need to stay full. The most marginalized and vulnerable, they will do anything to self-medicate the pain and are exploited to use things that will harm them, not help them.
- b. This shows the importance of using your voice to speak against oppression and suppression. Show up until something changes.

3. Anxiety of the people

The crowd joins in attacking them. But the same people in the crowd, many who were subjected to the same oppression as the demon-possessed girl, turned their fear driven by their own economic insecurity against those who were trying to make the world better. It caused them to turn on one another not to help one another, and they become violent. Be aware of those who tell you to be afraid of others.

The good news in this story is that God showed up to deliver his prophets. It was midnight and Paul and Silas were praying and singing songs to the Lord, even in their imprisonment. They were being obedient to what God told them to do, being faithful to preaching the Good News and healing the people. They kept showing up with their faith, and so God showed up! God sent a mighty earthquake that shook the chains loose off all the prisoners. Rev. Warnock encourages us to continue to show up and make our voices heard and watch God change things.

Reflection questions:

1. Was the “Spirit of Divination” a gift from God? Why or why not?
2. What did Paul deliver the girl from?
3. Why are these things problematic?
 - a. A woman being in control of her own body?
 - b. A person finding their own voice and controlling their own destiny?
 - c. Having power over your own power?
4. How have you seen people in society benefit from the exploitation of others?
5. How do you maintain your faith when people try to make your good deeds look bad?