

Sermon (5/8/16, Acts 16: 16-34):

It's difficult to keep a low profile when you have a person following you around and constantly calling people's attention to you. No, this is not the story of a Rock Star who cannot shake a crowd of admiring fans or a high ranking official surrounded by security guards. This is the story of Paul and Silas in Philippi being shadowed by a woman possessed by some sort of strange demon. Over and over again, she declared in no small voice, "Looky here, these two guys are slaves of the Most High God, and they have come to proclaim salvation!"

Clearly, Paul and Silas were not pleased. Apparently, all they wanted to do was quietly slip into a place of prayer in Philippi. Finally, out of sheer annoyance, Paul swings around and commands the evil spirit in this poor woman to get lost. Immediately it did just that!

Sheer annoyance. We often like to think that miracles in the Bible happened out of love and compassion, and, in many instances they do, but every now and again you run into an episode like this where the reason behind the healing takes on a not so pleasing odor. It sort of reminds me of the widow Jesus talked about in one of his lessons where, day after day, she knocked on the Judge's door seeking justice. Finally, just to get rid of her, the judge gives her what she wants.

It wasn't so much that this woman was hurling insults and lies. In fact, she, or should I say the demon in her, was more accurate in her description of Paul and Silas than anyone else. It's just that she was relentless. Where ever Paul and Silas went there she was – making a ruckus, turning heads, and causing Paul and Silas red faced embarrassment. Finally, perhaps in a similar way we might take the phone off the hook after one too many telemarketing calls, Paul flips his lid and heals her just to get rid of her!

A number of years ago, Al Gore did a documentary on global warming entitled 'An Inconvenient Truth'. I'm thinking that the healing of this woman might merit the title, 'An Inconvenient Healing'.

You see once this woman was set free from this evil demon, it ruined the one and only revenue stream her owners had. In fact, they had made a pretty good living off of her by renting her out as entertainment to

business conventions where she would tell fortunes and read palms. With the demon gone in her, she was now useless. Yes, it's economics 101 - no income potential, no worth.

What happens next is a full out assault on the ones who caused this economic threat to the community. Paul and Silas were beaten to within an inch of their lives and then hauled off to prison and shackled to the floor in the inner most parts of a cell where the suffering was most acute.

The healing of this woman was and is inconvenient. It was a threat to her owners' livelihood, to the economic well-being of the community, and, in all honesty, I think it challenges us to reflect on what happens within our own communities when our obsession with debits and credits so hardens our hearts that we lose sight of the dignity and worth of people.

My son's initial year at College has often made me think back to my College days. I remember how our anxieties would sometimes run high as we tried to figure out what we wanted to be when we grew up. Am I studying the right discipline? Is this really what I want to do the rest of my life? Making such critical decisions about our future at such a young and inexperienced age seemed ludicrous.

So much of our lives are spent in the labor force. Inevitably what we do, where we work, how we invest our time and energy influences greatly our sense of identity. For most of us, we spend a greater amount of time at our jobs than we do anywhere else. And while there are stories of those who take to their jobs with callous disregard, it has been my experience that, more often than not, there are far more who live out their vocations with passion and care. They care about what they do, what they produce, and the quality of what they accomplish.

Yes, the paycheck matters and, in all truth, it has to. It's the means by which we take care of our children, provide for basic needs, support those things that mean much to us, prepare for retirement, and carve out a space to play. Even so, for many, there is something deeper that is served by the vocations we invest our lives into. In some shape, manner, or form, it provides us with a sense of meaning and purpose.

How difficult that search for meaning becomes when economics becomes cold and loses its heart; when all decisions hinge upon the

bottom line as it did in this story from Acts. Sadly, it blinds us to the dignity and worth of the people whom our economics are meant to serve.

I see and hear the stories all the time. There is so much despair, so deep a sense of loss, so profound a sense of emptiness. ‘It’s become little more than a job to me...’ People say with a hitch in their throat. ‘Something I survive. Something I do because I must.’

I grew up in IBM country at a time when working for IBM was a plumb job. It was the kind of job where there was something deeper that went on between employer and employee than simply the bottom line. I never worked for IBM but knew lots of people who did and they spoke often of how they found value in their work. As rare as that kind of position was then, I fear it is even rarer today. Few and far between, it seems, are the people who feel valued by and find purpose in the work they do.

I have no doubt there are many complexities to this problem and it is not my purpose to oversimplify it. In fact, we probably could spend days, months, and even years discussing it but it is, I think, something well worth discussing.

Perhaps, today’s ‘Inconvenient Healing’ in Acts can be a good, albeit uncomfortable, catalyst. Perhaps, if we allow this story to truly have its way with us, it can be a good caution as to what happens when our economics loses its heart and even becomes a stumbling block to God’s healing grace. Like I said last week, God’s grace does seem to flow freely from this Christ, yet, equally true, it seems we also have been allowed the ability to thwart it, even by silencing those who are its conduits by shackling them to the fringes where they can be easily forgotten.

The good news is that we don’t have to wait for someone else to do something. Restoring our hearts to our checkbooks is something we can do now. Allowing grace to flow through even our bank accounts is something we can do now. Seeing, knowing, and appreciating the people who give of themselves at counters, in offices, and behind the transactions we make is something we can do now. Learning how to sing hymns even when the cost of setting another free is significant is something we can do now just as Paul and Silas did then. It’s not easy, it’s even risky but, I

think, the alternative of what we become when we don't is far, far worse.
To God alone be all the glory! Amen.