



Grace Lutheran Church

May 29, 2022: Seventh Sunday of Easter

“Enough of Thoughts and Prayers” ([Acts 16:16-34](#))

Why do we read the Bible? Why is God’s Word in this form the source and ground of our faith? Because it is alive. I don’t know if you believe me when I say that the Bible is a living book, but it is. It seeks us out and finds us wherever we are at any given moment with truth that is

always surprising and arresting, and sometimes turns your view of the world upside down, because that is what Jesus was all about – remember Opposite Day? God’s Word in a given passage never speaks to you the same way twice, because you are not the same person you were last time you encountered it.

This is the case with our first reading today. I love these chapters of Acts because it is truly one crazy thing after another, one calamity for Paul and his companions after another, and yet nothing can keep them from preaching the truth about Jesus Christ and making countless converts. For that reason I have long enjoyed this story of the fortune-telling slave girl. But when I returned to it this week, I discovered a truth about our world residing in those verses that I had never seen before.

We have just come off Paul’s great triumph of Lydia’s conversion and the baptism of her whole household. Today Paul and Silas run up against an indentured servant girl who is apparently possessed by a demon. Through this demon she has been raking in a lot of money for her owners by incessantly making false claims about Paul and Silas’ motives. Paul’s patience finally wears thin, so right there in the public square he performs an exorcism. This is a clue that the force driving her was not from God but from Satan. The text doesn’t describe the exorcism graphically as we find elsewhere, but we can imagine the evil spirit foaming at the mouth as it comes out of her, yelling at them, “Who do you think you are?”

What I realized in reading this is what I already knew but saw more clearly: An evil spirit has possessed our nation which incessantly hurls at us a series of deadly claims.

- The claim that deadly gun violence is not caused by easy access to weapons but by defects in the people who use them.
- The claim that the solution is not background checks and tighter regulations especially on the purchase of military-style assault weapons, but an increase in mental health funding.
- The claim that the best response is to put more armed guards in schools and to arm teachers. (Can you imagine that dark alternate reality in which a requirement for being a public school school educator is to be trained in the practice and carrying of firearms?)

- The claim that if someone wants to kill, they will find a way to do it. “Listen,” a prominent senator said this week, “at the end of day, you're arguing about what they're using to commit this, and the truth of matter is these people are going to commit these horrifying crimes whether they have to use another weapon to do it; they're going to figure out a way to do it.” So, Senator: Are we to just throw up our hands and wait for the next one?

I have been making notes all week from things I've heard and read, copying and pasting, scribbling in margins and on post-it notes. Here's an excerpt from a news story a few days ago that, more than anything else I've seen, lays bare the primal fear that is feeding this evil spirit:

On Aug. 3, 2019, a far-right gunman killed 23 people at a Walmart store in El Paso. Early the next morning, a man shot and killed nine people outside a bar in Dayton, Ohio. Both assailants used semiautomatic rifles.

At the White House the next day, Mr. Trump was so shaken by the weekend's violence that he questioned aides about a specific potential solution and made clear he wanted to take action, according to three people present during the conversation.

“What are we going to do about assault rifles?” Mr. Trump asked.

“Not a ___ ___ thing,” Mick Mulvaney, his acting chief of staff, replied.

“Why?” Trump demanded.

“Because,” Mr. Mulvaney told him, “you would lose.” [the 2020 election]

Power. Fear of losing power, of losing control. To those whose lives are possessed by this fear, I demand to know: Fear of losing control of what? For what purpose? What end does your control serve? When you sacrifice out of fear those most basic impulses that make you human—the instinct to be in community together that is the hallmark of human society, the essential desire to care for the well-being of others, the deep-seated belief that all of life is sacred, and the conviction that God desires the fullness of life for every living thing – then I have to wonder what kind of god you are serving. I know it is not the God that created the heavens and the earth, because that God desires that we all become one in his love, just as we heard in Jesus' great prayer in our gospel reading today.

At this terrible juncture in our nation's history, as we try to absorb the horror of sweet children and their beloved teachers whose lives and futures have been ripped from this earth, we might find the old cliché useful: What would Jesus do? You know: Jesus would not stand for it. Jesus would speak out. Jesus would overturn the tables of the money-changers. Jesus would speak truth to power.

Some already have. I'm sure many of you saw Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr's emotional press conference before Tuesday night's Game 4 in Dallas. He never mentioned basketball. Instead he focused on the events of the last two weeks: Elderly black people killed in

a supermarket in Buffalo. Asian churchgoers killed in Southern California. “And now we have children murdered at school,” he said. “WHEN ARE WE GOING TO DO SOMETHING? I’m tired of getting up here and offering condolences. I’m tired of moments of silence. Enough! There are 50 Senators right now who refuse to vote on HR 8, the background check bill the House passed a couple of years ago - it has been sitting there for two years. And there’s a reason they won’t vote on it - to hold onto power. To the 50 senators,” he continued, “are you going to put your own desire for power ahead of our children, ahead of the elderly, ahead of our churchgoers? ... 90% of Americans want background checks and we are being held hostage by 50 senators who refuse to even put it to a vote despite what we, the American people, want. They won’t vote because they want to hold onto their own power. IT’S PATHETIC. I’ve had enough!”

There. Power. Someone said it. Enough of thoughts and prayers...and yet on the Senate floor the next day, that is all that was offered up by those who could make a difference.

What would Jesus do? Are we going to let this moment fade as we steel ourselves to the next time and the next? What does it take to wake us up? Here are two questions people voiced from my stack of scribbled notes:

- Do we care more about our guns than we care about our children?
- Why can’t we require all gun owners to pass the same background checks we require of our Sunday school volunteers?

Consider the example of New Zealand, whose prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, was here this week to give the commencement speech at Harvard. Maybe you remember that the New Zealand parliament took quick action in 2019 after 51 people were killed at a mosque. Most semi-automatic weapons were banned and a buyback scheme launched to get tens of thousands of firearms out of circulation.

When asked how could New Zealand was able to do that when we can’t even pass universal background checks, she said, “New Zealanders are a very pragmatic people. Everyone said, ‘never again,’ and so it was incumbent on us as politicians to respond to that.”

Isn’t it incumbent on our politicians to respond to what we want? Aren’t we also saying “never again?” If our elected representatives aren’t hearing us because they fear losing power, how can we help them grasp that real power lies in doing everything possible to ensure that schoolchildren who have photos taken in the morning with honor-roll certificates in hand, and people who go to the grocery store, and people who go to church, can make it home safely?

A hard truth from this Acts reading is that speaking truth to power often does not go well at first. When Paul exorcised the demon, the girl’s owners immediately retaliated, dragging Paul and Silas before the authorities where they were quickly set upon by a mob, and stripped, beaten with rods, jailed and shackled. This same kind of persecution, metaphorically at least, will be visited on those who dare to expose the demon that is making it possible for our nation to be torn apart by violence again and again and again.

But then what happened to Paul and Silas? This is my favorite part. What were they doing there in jail, beaten, bruised, and shackled? They were praying and singing hymns to God, and all the prisoners were listening. Let us find strength and hope in hymns that testify to the living Christ, the ascended Christ who has been crowned king of the universe and is able to be present everywhere are once beyond the boundaries of time and space, who gathers all people into one with his Father in love.

Thine the splendor, thine the brightness, only thee, only thee! Amen.