Congregational Sermon for June 2, 2019 Easter 7C Acts 16: 16-34

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.

It’s a strange Sunday, if you follow the church year. Ascension Day was Thursday, and Pentecost is next Sunday. So that means that today is a Sunday that is in-between. Our Trinitarian theology teaches us that after Jesus ascends, he sends the Holy Spirit down in his place. And we celebrate that sending down on Pentecost.

Some congregations read the Pentecost story in different languages to represent the plethora of languages that were present at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem.

Some congregations release balloons to represent the tongues of fire from the Pentecost story, and some congregations serve birthday cake to celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church. I've even heard of a church that releases doves to symbolize the Holy Spirit. I'm pretty sure they do it outside.

But that’s all next week. This week we are still in the Easter Season—when we proclaim, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” and we share stories of the risen Christ among us. Except. We’re at the very tail end of the Easter Season. And we are waiting for what comes next.

You are listening to this sermon this way because your regular preacher is at the Synod Assembly. As a Synod we are also waiting for what comes next. Over this past weekend, the synod gathered and prayed and elected a new bishop, who will start September 1. That is very exciting. The Synod will have new leadership starting September 1, and you are invited to attend the Installation of the new Bishop on September 21.

But that’s still 3 months off. And the thing about in-between times—there is still work to be done. You know that. When a pastor leaves your congregation—another doesn’t magically appear the next day, or week, or month. But there is work to be done. And so you keep going, even though it is an in-between time, and you’re being asked to do something that you don’t normally do. You keep going.

And sometimes, in in-between times, you begin to see things a little differently. Maybe there were things you always just assumed would happen in the church, that now you know how they happen. In an in-between time you get to see things from the other side.

On this in-between Sunday (between Ascension Day and Pentecost) and during this in-between time (between the election of a new bishop and the Installation three months later) I want us to take a look at the lesson from Acts. Acts is so full of action—vivid stories, amazing doings. I expect that if you have been around church for a while that this story will be familiar to you.

Let’s go over the high points. Paul and his companions were traveling from city to city, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. They were in Philippi (home of the Philippians), and they were heading to the synagogue to share their story. The synagogue was the natural place for them to go. Followers of Jesus were still, in most places, seen as an offshoot of the Jewish population, and the Synagogue was the natural place for them to seek an audience.

But something strange happened on the way to the Synagogue. A slave girl with an extraordinary gift of seeing and intuiting far more than the average person outed them. She started following Paul and his companions saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

Now there are a couple of things I want to say about that. First, it is true. She is spot on. They are followers of God and they do proclaim the way of salvation. But there was more going on here than meets the eye at first.

This gifted savant, this slave girl who told the truth, wasn't content to say it once and be done with it. Apparently, she followed Paul and his group to and from the synagogue every day, kind of like a one-woman paparazzi mob, and she began to get on Paul's nerves. At first, he was a little irritated. And then he was really irritated, so irritated that he actually did something.

It is important to remember that this was a slave girl, a nobody. She doesn't even have a name in the story. She would have been a Gentile, captured by the Romans as they conquered yet another country. Fortunately for her, before the Romans could turn her into what female prisoners of war usually became, they discovered her extraordinary gift of soothsaying, of divination. They discovered a cash cow.

They took her to cities, to markets and fairs and made money off her gift of uncanny insight. Until she crossed Paul. I'm not sure why Paul was so annoyed with this otherwise harmless young woman who told the truth. If he had it to do over again, maybe he'd invite her to join his team. But he didn't. And he got so annoyed by this pesky young woman that he exorcised her. He removed whatever it was within her that gave her such extraordinary insight.

And suddenly she was simply an ordinary young woman, with nothing special about her. Suddenly, she was no longer making money for her owners. And they were angry.

The New Testament is full of stories about people who are possessed in some way or another, people who are not ordinary. Some are deeply distressed, or violent or a threat to others. That isn't the case here. This slave girl simply tells fortunes for a living, except that, being a slave, she doesn't get the living. Her owners do. She is a slave.

I used to think that slavery was a thing of the past, that it existed in ancient times, and in the centuries before the Emancipation Proclamation, but it still exists. Have you been to a highway rest stop? There are posters that say, "Do you feel like a slave?" "Is someone controlling your life?" "Are you doing housework, factory work, sex work against your will?"

Modern day slavery is alive and well across the globe. It is not the same as the slavery that defined the American South before the Civil Way. But it is just as evil. It targets the vulnerable, young people who are desperate, people who think they would do anything to get out of their situation--poverty, war, an abusive home situation.

People today become slaves in all sorts of ways. Sometimes their families sell them. Sometimes they are tricked--they think they are signing on for legitimate work in another country, and when they get there they are told they have to pay back their passage or something.. And they are kept in slavery. They can be factory workers, sailors, child soldiers. Sex workers.

Women of the ELCA as an organization does good work in educating members about human trafficking, which happens in every state in the US, as well as globally.

In the story from Acts, the slave girl was a victim of human trafficking. She did pretty well as long as she was able to earn money for her owners. But when she lost that ability, her owners were furious. Their investment was no longer producing.

Now at this point, we have a couple of choices. One is to follow the story that we have in the book of Acts. The angry owners took Paul and his companions to the law, who listened to the story and threw them in jail. And then comes the earthquake, Paul's refusal to escape, the jailer's gratitude and conversion. The slave girl is heard of no more, having served her purpose to get Paul into jail so that the jailer might be converted.

That's one track to follow, and it is the track we usually follow. After all, it is the story that is recorded in scripture. But there is another track. And in this in-between time, after the Ascension and before Pentecost, I'd like us to try to follow the other track, the road not taken, as it were. I'd like us to follow the slave girl. I'd like us to follow the slave girl because she was just the sort of person Jesus would have reached out to, just the sort of unsuitable person he would have invited to dinner. He specialized in outcasts, pariahs, people that good folks would have considered not the sort they wanted to have anything to do with. Jesus was like that.

Paul, on the other hand, silenced her, because she was an annoyance. This is not the first time a woman was silenced in scripture, and it is not the last. In Luke's telling of the resurrection story, the women find the tomb empty except for the angels who remind them what Jesus had taught them. And when they raced back to the other disciples and told them the astounding news, they were dismissed, silenced, along with their "idle tale."

We know what happened to those women who had been at the tomb. They became faithful followers of the risen Christ, even as they had been faithful followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

But we don't know what happened to this slave girl who no longer could earn her keep by telling fortunes convincingly. Some commentators speculate that she must have been overjoyed. No longer was she compelled to say what came into her head. But what those commentators are neglecting is that she is still a slave. She is still owned by a cartel of ruthless men. What's a slave girl to do when her economic value as a soothsayer is gone? What are her owners going to do with her? Set her free? Commend her for her truth-telling? I don't think so. I think we can all imagine what her fate was to be, this young female whose life was not her own.

Because nameless as she is, she is the face of the neighbor Jesus taught us to love. She is the stranger, the foreigner, the face of so many of God's children whom the world passes by, whom the world considers expendable, people for whom Jesus gave his life.

We are, as I said in the beginning, in an in-between time--between Ascension and Pentecost. In-between times give us the opportunity to reflect, to see things from a different perspective, and maybe come up with new insights. In this in-between time I invite us to remember the slave girl, who was not set free by telling the truth, who was, in a sense, collateral damage to the main story of Paul and the conversion of the jailer.

 And I want us to remember the millions of beloved children of God who are trafficked across the globe, in every one of our states, in every country where we have missionaries, where we sent our students for global learning. In our cities and in our rural area, and on reservations. Slavery knows no boundaries.

 But the good news is--neither does God's love. God’s love through Jesus Christ knows no boundaries at all. He died for the poor and the rich, for the gentiles and the Jews. He died for city folks and rural people, for slaves and jailers, for North Americans and South Africans, for all races and ethnicities, for immigrants and tribal members. No boundaries.

Thanks be to God!

Amen

Bishop Jessica Crist