

Our Wrongs and God's Right **Acts 16:16-34**

Things that annoy you!

There are things, maybe many things that annoy you. What are they? When I lived in a dormitory at Boston University, my upstairs neighbor threw his skateboard or something heavy on the floor at 2 a.m. every night. That annoyed me. Another thing that annoys me is that some people forget to mute their background noise during zoom meetings. During a clergy meeting, one person forgot to mute himself so I could hear that the Red Sox were winning the game even though I didn't watch the game. But one thing that really annoys me is a buzzing fly. I don't know how but many flies seem to find their way into the parsonage and sometimes they make a chorus of buzzing sounds. If a buzzing fly kept bothering you, what would you do? A fly swatter is one option, insect killer or traps... or fly repellent. These are some things we can do to keep these buzzing and annoying creatures away.

Our Wrongs 1: Prejudice

In today's scripture, Paul encountered a somewhat annoying and irritating little creature, a slave girl. Like a buzzing fly that just would not leave him alone, this little girl with a spirit of divination kept following them. She shouted, "These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Paul would have said the same thing about themselves. Her testimony about them was true and good for Paul and his friends, but Paul became annoyed with her. Her constant presence and incessant talking seemed to annoy him. I get that. If one of you kept following me and saying, "oh pastor Yohan. You are good." "Thank you!" "You are great." "O.k"... "You are fantastic! You are awesome!" I would surely get annoyed. (Thank you for not doing that.) Paul was annoyed by this girl constantly following and talking about them.

But what still bothers me is why Paul could not celebrate her testimony on their behalf. He could have said, "Yes. You are right! We are the slaves of the Most High God!" But he didn't. Rather he was annoyed by her. According to Dr. Amy Lindeman, Assistant Professor of New Testament at Christian Theological Seminary, "Perhaps what really annoys Paul is that while he is attempting to establish authority and proclaim the Gospel in Philippi, the testimony of this girl (while true) was actually serving to undermine him. After all, she was young, enslaved, and female—intersecting categories that might lead one to discount her in the best of circumstances.... So, Paul wrongfully disregards this girl because of her status; because she is not helping his cause."¹ Paul did not think that her testimonies were helpful for his mission because of her lowly status. He was biased and acted with bias against this little girl. While Paul was able to cross the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, his mind was still deeply influenced by prejudices, an oppressive social hierarchy and sexism of his time. Being a Christian does not mean that we are completely free from all negative influences of sin and evil in our society. Prejudice hurts. It hurts people badly.

This month is Asian American Pacific Islander heritage month. Unfortunately, hate crimes against Asian Americans have rapidly increased. According to a March 2022 study by The National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), there has been a 339% increase in reports of hate crimes against Asian Americans over the past year. Racial prejudice against Asian Americans is still pervasive in our society and we are not free from that influence.

¹ <https://politicaltheology.com/our-wrongs-and-gods-right-acts-1616-34/>

Combined with sexism, prejudice against Asian American women hurts and can even be lethal. You may remember the Atlanta spa shootings last year. 8 people were killed by a young man. He was very active in his Southern Baptist congregation but this Christian man murdered other people. This was the first tragedy. However, the second tragedy began to unfold as a police spokesperson implicitly suggested that the women were sex workers because they worked in massage parlors and that they were the “cause” of the shooter’s “sex addiction.”² This statement shows how our society has viewed Asian women. Robin Jester Wootton said, “The hypersexualization of Asian women is not new. And I know it all too well. I know how it feels to think my sole purpose in existing is to pleasure men and cater to their fetishization of someone who looks like me. I know what it’s like to be seen as nothing more than a sex toy, a trinket, exotic, sensual, submissive, and sub-human. I hated the stereotype.”³ Seeing other people as less than human is a clear violation of God’s purpose. Any act of discriminating against people in terms of certain categories is contradictory to God’s will. Minimizing one’s being into certain categories like young, enslaved, and female is just plain wrong. And Paul was wrong about this girl. His action toward this girl was wrong.

A Cycle of wrongdoings: Violence against those who are different

When this girl kept following and speaking about them, what did Paul do? As a way to keep this annoying girl away, Paul cast out the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. (v. 18) Paul didn’t heal her out of his compassion or Christian love. He did it because he was annoyed. He did it for his own comfort and perhaps missionary success above the needs and wants of this enslaved girl.

Was this slave girl grateful for Paul’s act? We don’t know. The Bible didn’t tell us about her response at all. But remember that this girl was a slave and her owners valued her because of her ability of divination. Her comfort and status in that household were dependent on her special ability and now she lost it and became suddenly less useful to her owners. Paul wasn’t concerned about the well-being of this girl and his uninvited interference put her in a difficult position. Dr. Amy wrote, “Since there is no description of physical or emotional pain to the girl in light of the spirit, it is therefore possible, if not likely, that in this instance she would have agreed with her owners, the crowds, and authorities in their outrage at Paul’s uninvited interference.”⁴

As Paul acted with bias, bias was returned. The slave owners were angry at them and dragged them before the authorities. Instead of accusing Paul and his friends for disrupting their means of livelihood, they charged them with “disturbing the city” because “they are Jews.” (vs 20) They identified them only by their ethnicity and violated their human rights. Paul and his friends were stripped, beaten with rods and imprisoned without a proper trial because they were Jews! Like the enslaved girl, Paul and his companions were regarded as the kind of people, not to be associated with or as third-class citizens. You know Paul and his fiery personality! Paul could get angry at those slave owners and all those gentiles who devalued him and violated his right because of his ethnicity. The vicious cycle of devaluation, oppression, and hatred could continue. Sadly, this is what is happening in our society and the world.

God’s Right!

² <https://www.asianamericanchristiancollaborative.com/article/jesus-sees-us-atlanta-spa-shootings>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The good news is that God intervenes. God intervenes to stop this cycle of hatred and devaluation through the people of God. I wonder what Paul might have been thinking in the prison that evening. I am pretty sure that he must have had to deal with his ego and anger. He might have thought about what he did to the girl that day and how she might be doing on that evening after losing her ability of divination. He must also have thought about what her owners and other people had done to him and his friend. Sore and bruised... but still, his spirit was alert. Instead of immersing himself in the endless cycle of anger and negative emotions, he might choose to bring everything to God.

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake. The walls shook; the foundations of the floors rattled; and their chains fell off. (vs 25-26).

If you were one of the prisoners and suddenly your prison door opens and handcuffs unfasten, what would be your first instinct? I would consider making a run for it, escaping from unjust punishment. However, Paul and his companions didn't follow their natural instinct but remained in their cell. For them, an earthquake and the miracle of freeing them from their chains were the sign of God's presence. Paul and his friend felt the very presence of God in that place, at that moment and the prison cell suddenly became a holy place of encountering God. What did God tell them? We don't know. But I believe that in that moment, Paul and his companions would have felt that the gospel could not be chained to ethnic or social boundaries. God reminded them of God's boundary-breaking love and the promise of the gospel.

With faith in God's promise, they stayed and because they stayed, the jailer, the enemy, heard the good news of God's love and became a Christian. Someone has to stop the cycle of hatred and only those who experience deep love and have faith in God's promise can do it. Hate only begets more hate but God intervenes and breaks the chain of hatred through God's people who see and experience God's love. God's love is stronger than hatred and evil. Because of this experience, Paul could write in Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

I feel like we are living in an age of fear, division and hatred. War, mass shootings, racial hate crimes... all these violent tragedies perpetuate the endless cycle of fear, hatred, and violence, and some people benefit from this. We all mourn and pray for the tragedy that happened in a school in Texas. Whenever we heard about a mass shooting in schools, it broke our hearts. But nothing has really changed even after these tragedies. After mass shootings, some people always say that “we need more guns to protect our children We have to arm teachers or staff s to make school safe. But that's non-sense. If a teacher causes a similar tragedy, then what would we say? Arm students to protect themselves? Violence never ends violence. For decades after the Columbine High School massacre, nothing really changes.

We feel helpless and there's nothing we can do to stop this hideous cycle. We cannot, but God can. God intervenes to stop the destructive cycle of violence and hatred through God's people. Do you know how to stop a wheel? [ppt] You just insert a stick in the spokes of the wheel! We are the sticks that can stop the cycle of hatred and violence. With faith in God, we stand our ground in love when the foundations are shaking. The Ukraine War, the Buffalo mass shooting and Texas School Massacre, political division in our country... our foundations seem to be shaken by unspeakable violence and hatred. My sisters and brothers in Christ. stand firmly, grounded in love. Trust God and say, ‘no to violence and hatred.’ Stop the wheel of hatred, fear and violence with love. May God be with us all as we stand our ground in love. Amen.