

**Disturbing the Peace**  
**A Sermon by Louise Westfall**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Cleveland Heights, Ohio**  
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**Text: Acts 16:16-40**

One of my favorite cartoons from *New Yorker* magazine shows a pastor greeting the flock as they depart from worship. The people all look like they've just come out of the vortex of a tornado – with eyes wide open and dazed expressions, clothing askew, and scorched hair standing on end. One worshiper is gripping the minister's hand and saying, "Great sermon, reverend." Well. It's hard to imagine that was the unanimous opinion of the congregation. But at the same time, we know that speaking the truth of the Christian gospel will sometimes cause turmoil and upheaval. Someone has said that the best preaching should comfort the afflicted...and afflict the comfortable.

So it has been from the beginning. Proclaiming the word of God kept the Old Testament prophets in trouble, cost Jesus his life, and posed constant challenges to the early church. The book of Acts chronicles the first heady years following Jesus' resurrection and his commission to "go and make disciples of all nations" --as the apostles traveled to the ends of the earth preaching and teaching and baptizing in his name. The congregations they established became the Christian Church, and we who have come two millennia later can learn much from the glimpses we get of their faith and practice. As we read the compelling narrative, we cannot miss noting the persistent perception that this new religion was turning the world upside down, shaking its established foundations and establishing a kingdom unlike any other.

The morning text provides one example. The apostle Paul and Silas have traveled to the city of Philippi on their church-planting mission. They've enjoyed some early success, and their powerful preaching and teaching had not escaped notice. Listen for God's Word to the

church in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 16 at the 16<sup>th</sup> verse.        ACTS 16:16-40

One of my favorite moments of the week comes as I climb the steps into this pulpit and gaze out upon you. From this perspective, you seem eager to be engaged with God's Word; your faces upturned, many of you smiling with encouragement, full of anticipation and hope; I feel we are in this moment together and that what comes out of my mouth will simply contribute to the ongoing conversation the church holds about hearing God's Word and applying it in our lives. From YOUR perspective, however, you may see it differently. You may notice the person in the pew busily making their grocery list, reading a novel, knitting, head bowed and eyes closed in prayer (or is that sleep?). Your mind may be a thousand miles from here, with concerns from work or family or the war in Iraq. One member's adult children tattled on him two weeks ago, calling my attention to the cartoon he drew during my sermon on diversity: he had sketched in amazing detail two Native Americans greeting a pilgrim coming ashore with "Welcome! We heard that diversity is culturally enriching!" Sounds like commentary to me!

What you see depends on your perspective. That appears to be going on in the scripture text as well. The apostle heals a slave woman of an infirmity which brought financial gain to her owners. He and his company are arrested and charged with disturbing the peace. And they were – at least from the perspective of the slave's owners, and others who envisioned what this power might mean for other practices. Upsetting the status quo; fixing what in their minds was not broken.

It's ironic that Paul's motivation for healing the young woman doesn't even seem to be particularly spiritual: he's annoyed by her continual disrupting cries (truthful though they be, which only adds to the irony!). Once imprisoned, Paul and Silas disturb the quiet of the cell block with their midnight song fest. They are liberated from their chains by the literal shaking of the foundations through a strong and well-timed earthquake, which leads to the jailer's confession and

baptism, and their reluctant release by the city fathers. A whole lot of peace is disturbed in this biblical account.

Disturbing the peace...or making true peace? It depends on your perspective. On the one hand, if preservation of the way things are is most highly valued, then the apostle's act threw a monkey wrench into the well-oiled institution. On the other hand, if healing and liberation are the greater values, then Paul should be christened a peacemaker. Paul never set out to break the rules or disturb the peace; in the letter to the Romans he exhorts the believers to "honor the governing authorities." Here and elsewhere, however, he disturbs the peace to establish God's peace. In service to a greater good, he dis-orders the status quo.

Peering in this window on the early church, we learn something distinctive about it – something that distinguishes it from other human institutions and groups. Witnessing to God's love and saving purposes for humanity is the calling of the church; it is its mission and its highest value. Human institutions value stability as an end, and balance the need for stability and self-preservation against individual needs. When the church turns inward on itself, preoccupied with institutional maintenance, preserving the peace, silencing perceived opponents---it may become a successful organization, but it has lost its true calling. Instead, the church is called to proclaim the gospel of peace, God's gift of grace which brings us life and healing.

But it's not a very orderly gospel. See if you resonate with this description of a church I read recently:

- \*People express a spectrum of viewpoints, speak out openly, and engage in dialog;;*
- \*New groups keep cropping up and bumping into each other over schedules and competing over volunteers;*
- \*The choirs are filled with lots of amateurs;*
- \*The kids are noisy and all over the place;*
- \*Coffee hour is crowded and confusing; the front door is almost off its hinges; the line item for hospitality is way over budget; when you*

*look around there are a bunch of people you don't know. [Reprinted from Trinity Chimes]* Sound familiar? The description is from an article on church growth titled "Marks of a Healthy Church." The author seems to take a page from Acts to conclude that ministry in Jesus' name disturbs the peace of the institution. Yes, it's about change—the kind of change that helps people discover their identity as beloved children of God and claim the life Christ came to bring them. If making the gospel accessible to people of all ages, at various stages of life, of different races and perspectives is our goal, then we will not fear resulting changes, but acknowledge them as part of God's redeeming purposes.

Don't ask me what I scored when I took the SAT back in high school. But I'll never forget one part of it, in the section where you read a short essay of several paragraphs and then have to answer questions related to it. This particular essay described the work of Dorothea Dix, an American woman who worked tirelessly for improved prison conditions and the establishment of state hospitals for persons with severe mental illness. It described her repeated appearance before various legislative bodies, her advocacy work, the impassioned speeches she gave and articles she wrote. One of the questions read, "Today we would consider Dorothea Dix to be a ....." followed by four choices. While I understood "social reformer" to be the correct answer, one of the other choices also seemed apt: "troublemaker." Fact is, doing God's work, proclaiming the gospel of grace, will sometimes disturb the peace and disrupt established ways and means within church and society. While such disruption is never our goal, neither can it be the determining factor for our faith and practice. Disturbing the peace may be the price we pay for finding the peace. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words echo today from church pulpit and jail cell, both of which he inhabited: *I still believe that standing up for the truth of God is the greatest thing in the world. This is the end of life. The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.*

I'm glad we don't have to do this by ourselves. The point of Christian community, the power of "church" is that we have

companions at our side, when standing up for the truth of God takes us into prisons and mental hospitals or the sixth grade Sunday School class; when serving the homeless, the heartbroken, or the harried; when fixing the system or the ramp entrance door; and when figuring out how we're going to pay for it all. And we have music! The words of a Quaker hymn remind us that God gives us songs at midnight; how can we keep from singing?

Though locked in jail, Paul and Silas rejoiced. What made their singing possible was their trust that God's rule is more powerful than any other's. They understood the world was being turned upside down but they were not the ones doing it. It is God and God's intent to save the whole creation through Jesus Christ. This is the grace that saves us – not the goodness and faith of any human institution (even the church). The church must see itself as the mirror reflecting the light of Christ; we are witnesses to the love and power that does indeed shake both heaven and earth. (Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Shaking Heaven and Earth*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, pp. 105-114) Standing up for this truth may bring disturbance, but it will also bring us peace and unfettered joy.

Perhaps it was the apostle's experiences in a Philippian jail that prompted words he wrote to them later, when he was again a prisoner ---words that offer encouragement to the church even now as we seek to do God's will, come what may. *Rejoice in the Lord always! I say it again, rejoice! Everyone should see how unselfish you are. Jesus is near. Dismiss all anxiety from your minds. Present your needs to God in prayer and in petitions full of gratitude. Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your heart and mind. Amen.*

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