

May 12, 2013

## **The Seventh Sunday of Easter**

Acts 16:16-34

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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### **Breaking the Cycle of Violence**

I have learned again in recent days that I am not the relaxed, sanguine, easy going person that I sometimes imagine myself to be. The occasion for this renewed insight has been the replacement of our church computer server, upgrading of software and other systems and so forth. What was assumed to be a 48 hour project is now entering its third week. It has been a dreadful experience with communications being severely disrupted--programs and ministries adversely affected--and just about anyone who has had to deal with this at any level being 'testy' at best. And I have found myself resorting to some of the most basic instincts that all of us have at some level and it is not pretty. I have wanted someone to blame. I have wanted some consequence to someone for the disruption we have experienced. "Heads will roll." (I can hear my sixteen year old Joanna saying 'First World problems, Dad. First world problems.' And 'Take a chill pill'. And other remarks, equally pertinent and equally unhelpful in getting me to calm down.) Anger begets anger. I laid on the horn as some SUV taxi made a right turn on a red light right in front of me. The driver of said taxi then gesticulated in a relatively unattractive fashion and I had to make a conscious choice not to respond in some way. Ridiculous. But real.

Such tribulations remind me of something I really don't care for in myself. We all have some very basic functional theology at work in us, even when we have moved on intellectually. Most of us believe that hard work should be rewarded, that wrongdoers should be punished, that good things should flow to good people and the like. (One obituary of Margaret Thatcher recalled that she was explicitly motivated by such truisms and remembered on wag calling it "the Methodism in her madness.") One of those basic intuitions that most of us carry, whether we know it or not, is the idea that violence can somehow be redemptive or make things better. If someone bullies you, hit them back harder. Or even the best defense is a good offense. We recognize this reality and do our best to manage it as a society, outlawing vigilantes and individual vengeance, making use of courts and, when necessary, prisons. Some say that we subsume some our violent tendencies into sport. But what we know is that free floating rage can lead to all kinds of escalation when computers mess up or traffic is stressful. Our anger begets such things as violence and coercion, demonstrations of power and all kinds of unintended consequence.

And so it was for Paul in the story of the Philippian jailer. He and Silas were being tailed by a slave-girl who had what they understood to be a spirit of divination. She brought her owners a great deal of money through telling fortunes and she followed Paul and Silas around for a number of days shouting "These men are slaves of the most high God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Paul, understandably, was irritated by this as

though a chihuahua had grabbed hold of his ankle and wouldn't let go. So, after some days, Paul, "very much annoyed" we are told, cast out the spirit from the woman. He did what we might think was a good thing, but set in action a chain of unintended consequences. She became useless to those who were exploiting her. They dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates. Racism, norms, mores and coercion all come into play. They are Jews, for God's sake. They are advocating things illegal for Romans, namely denying the cult of the Emperor. They are disturbing the peace. The crowds joined in—group think always so productive of bad things—with the result that they are stripped and beaten, flogged and thrown in jail. The cycle of violence in all its glory.

In this story we tend to focus on the profound act of grace that took the form of an earthquake, not worrying too much about how many people were killed or homes destroyed. In this story the only effect was that the doors of the prison were thrown wide open as the foundations of the prison were shaken. Paul and companions responded to their apparent good fortune by seeming to act against their interest and not only staying put, but staying the hand of the jailer who was about to kill himself, afraid of the authorities who had ordered him to keep the prisoners secure. They chose to respond to grace in a way that broke the cycle of violence and led to the reorientation of the life of the jailer and his entire household toward that grace. The foundations of the prison were indeed shaken by, not only a mighty act of God, but also by Paul's response in choosing to stay put.

Friends, the mechanisms by which we try and manage the world through coercive violence were unveiled on Good Friday, shown for what they were, and resisted by the One who refused to countenance those ways by his silence at his trials and even at the cost of his life. It is for us as well to choose the way of life and find ways to interrupt and break that cycle of violence that flows from and probably shapes our most basic responses when we are angry, feel thwarted or righteous and are tempted to road rage and all its relatives.

Last year we heard another story of mothers seeking to act for peace in Northern Ireland, this time against a vigilante group called Republican action against Drugs or RAAD. Apparently they would call out people they believed to be drug dealers and break their kneecaps, beat them up or bomb their property in what they called "punishment shootings." They thought that violence could be redemptive I suppose. (They have since aligned with another lot called the Real Republican Army.) A group was formed to oppose them called MOVE ON—Mothers opposing Violence Everywhere in Our Neighborhoods. (Took them a while to come up with that one!) It is the kind of mothering that we can really celebrate on this Mother's Day, --the kind of mothering that so many of you do so gracefully and so intuitively, --mothering that teaches the way of peace in the face of violence and encourages every one of us to respond to grace when we can. It encourages us to respond in ways that are themselves graceful and which interrupt the cycle of violence and the myth of redemptive violence that shapes some of our most basic intuitive responses and reactions in the world. We don't seek to escape or withdraw from the world. Instead we stay put, declining to do what would be expected of us. We don't stop driving because of the possibility of road rage, but we stay engaged refusing to allow our instincts to take over.

The gospel of peace is a hard gospel for most of us, but it is the way of life. It was the jailer who washed his prisoners' wounds once he realized that the cycle was interrupted by Paul's response to grace. As surely as anger begets anger and violence begets violence, so grace begets grace for every one of us.

in our customary time of silence for prayer, I invite you to ask that in the days to come you may recognize God's grace in your life in such a way that you may be a peacemaker and minister grace in a broken and violent world, living the reasonable and holy hope that is in you. Grace begets grace. In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...