

SERMON: "THE SPIRIT ... AT WORK AT WORK"
TEXTS: OLD TESTAMENT 2 KINGS 2:1-12
NEW TESTAMENT ACTS 16:16-34

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INTRODUCTION

What's a preacher to do with these verses? A healing story turned courtroom drama turned prison break, is that a three-part outline? Or maybe focus on one of the three. I could focus on the first part about a slave woman who had a spirit that she used (her owners used) to make money fortune telling. A sermon on the evil of fortune telling?

No. not going to that (though many have) for several reasons
The first being that healing stories in the gospels and in Acts are not about the ailment, just like a person is not defined by the disease affecting them
It is far better to celebrate recovery than to find a villain to vilify

I'm not going to cherry pick a bible verse to condemn fortune telling or talk bad about people whose spirituality leans mystic. You may connect to God through journaling or talk of angels or burning sage or an eastern discipline
Fine by me, who am I to make you color in lines someone else drew. Who am I to get in the ways God is at work. I can learn with and from you

Okay, not that. Maybe a sermon focused on the prison break
How Paul is freed and not only that how the jailers' family comes to believe
I did that last time this passage rolled round in the lectionary,
talked about how freedom spreads. Not going to preach that again
Freedom's not exactly spreading these days. Being taken away actually

That leaves the middle section about the disciples getting in trouble
for healing a slave girl who made money for her owners telling fortunes
The story begins with a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

THE COST OF FREEDOM

This would be a much nicer story with a few changes

First, Paul doesn't exactly free her out of the goodness of his heart

He does so because she keeps bugging him.

He gets rid of the spirit to, in effect, get rid of her.

Then the freedom he gives her doesn't go far enough. She's still a slave

She is still a slave and now a slave that has fallen out of favor

with her owners, because they can't make any money off her now

because she no longer has the 'gift' to tell fortunes

You see how a bit of freedom mixes things up?

Now what seems like a healing story, servant girl healed of unclean spirit,

turns into a question of economics. Freedom, actually isn't free. It can be costly

But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men, these Jews, are disturbing our city and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us, being Romans, to adopt or observe." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Sometimes the bible isn't all that pretty. You notice there is no more mention of the slave girl, what happened to her. Like her fate doesn't even matter.

All we are told is that 'their hope of making money was gone.' That does not bode well for her. I know, growing up in Georgia, that the stories of slaveowners treating their slaves kindly are, in fact, self-serving lies.

Her story, her taste of some form of freedom doesn't go far enough for her

No, her healing opens us a bigger, messier question about Jesus and his place

The good news of the gospel, her healing, has affected someone's business

Jesus has gotten all up in their business. What are we to make of that?

Let's focus on that question, shall we?

I've noticed two answers. One is to say 'it's just business' or "business is business" which are both ways of pushing Jesus out of the workplace, out of the marketplace.

It's a separation of Monday through Friday and Sunday. Segregated.

We may not be so blunt but isn't this is a way of saying to Jesus,

"mind your own business."

JESUS IN OUR BUSINESS

The argument often is that business is neutral “it’s just business”
And often times it is – just making widgets, just selling stuff,
just the office friendships (and drama) at the Dunder-Mifflin paper company
it would be nice if that were the case ... but it is not
Things come up, challenges, questions, hurdles, opportunities

That leads to the second answer. We can tell Jesus to mind his business
or we can let Jesus mess with our business. We can even advertise
as a Christian business. Do business in Jesus’ name. Ethical questions will come up
about how faith works at work ... how will we wrestle with and answer them
How does our Sunday faith work Monday through Friday?

This is really a sermon for you to preach – your work, your stories, your challenges
As you might imagine, my employer has no problem mixing faith and work
As a matter of fact, my employer would recommend I approach the subject
of faith and the workplace with humility and with a question - How can the
church, how can your pastors support you – your challenges, your opportunities?

How does your faith go to work at work? I remember I was in college
My dad called a family meeting (I didn’t know we had those)
He got us all together and with my mom by his side, he said
“I am currently working for a man I do not respect. He is unethical
I have shared many examples with your mom. She knows.”

My dad spent 25 with the US Secret Service, retired from that and was working at
Georgia Power in corporate security. He explained that he would be looking
for another job and that it might mean some changes and uncertainty for us
He found other work at Georgia Power, resolving employee complaints

My dad was faced with an ethical choice, a tough choice.
That can happen at work. Maybe you’re asked to do something you don’t think
is right. Maybe you see things being done that you know are wrong.
You hear the way people may talk about others. What do you do?
Have you had any family meetings? Made some tough choices?

The church needs to be here for you and with you. Let us walk with you

This passage shows the good news challenging how we make our money
The same holds true for how we spend it, how we invest it
Can you picture Jesus, the risen Christ, standing next to you
as you open your wallet to ... you fill in that blank

Billy Graham is quoted saying *“Give me five minutes with a person's checkbook,
and I will tell you where their heart is.”*

SUMMARY

How we spend and invest our money communicates our values

The Presbyterian Church USA has some money, primarily in our pension fund.

How those moneys are invested is managed carefully to reflect our values

For example no stocks in alcohol companies, no firearms, things like that

And a big argument about ten years ago. We divested from Caterpillar

after three years of seeking to negotiate with them because they make

a bulldozer sold to the Israeli government whose sole use is to demolish

the homes of Palestinians who are legally in their homes on their land

but who are removed anyway to make room for more settlements

Tough choices are not just about how we make our money

They are also about how we spend it and how we invest it

One more example, another bigger argument. Let's talk Bud Light

One of the phrases I heard as people complained after Bud Light

gifted a trans influencer a specially decorated can of beer which led

to some celebrities posting themselves shooting up cases of beer

then to an uproar and a boycott was talk of "woke beer companies"

Is that really a pressing problem, woke beer companies pushing their agenda?

Is there a bigger "woke agenda" being pushed on us by the media

and a bunch of woke companies pushing their values on us?

Ok, some companies do have and promote their values

Subaru leans into their values with their ads. Target has a history of inclusiveness

Chik-Fil-A supports conservative causes including for several years supporting

conversion therapy for LGBTQ people (a controversial practice that is not

recognized as therapy by psychological associations). They have since

stopped that practice in response to customer complaints.

But are companies pushing their agendas on us? I'd argue they are not

They just want to sell their products to as wide an audience as possible

That audience includes a wide variety of people who want to see themselves in ads

Interracial couples in mattress ads, gay couples in ads for matchmaking

And yes ...trans people who may want to drink boring beer

All sorts of people are part of the public square, the marketplace

Jesus is part of that workplace and marketplace as well. And as for his part,

given what we know of who he associated with, tax collectors and sinners

And who he was critical of – religious authorities ... Where do you think

we might find him? I'd suggest he'd be having a beer with friends

a trans influencer and an angry guy who might be out of beer

cause he decided to shoot it instead of putting it in a cooler