



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER, JUNE 2, 2019  
ACTS 16:16-34; PSALM 97; REVELATION 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; JOHN 17:20-26

## CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

“Mom! Mom! Remember, you are wearing your collar.” My daughter loves to tell me this when we are in the car, stuck in traffic, and I grow unusually agitated and loud. I admit, sometimes I get frustrated with people who get in the way, especially when I’m driving, and we are late. I would say I’m impatient, but Madeline says bad traffic makes me annoyed. On some days, she might say it makes me “very much annoyed”! It turns out that being annoyed is unbecoming, especially for a mom and a priest.

The reading from Acts offers another example. For several days, a servant girl tags along with Paul and his band of evangelists. This unnamed girl is possessed, not only by spirits but also by fellow human beings. As the property of other human beings, her life is precarious at best.

When the girl encounters Paul, something shifts in her. A new voice emerges

from within her. Like Paul, she begins to proclaim salvation through the living God. Most pastors would delight in this kind of conversion, but not Paul. For whatever reason, Paul is not happy about her transformation or her presence. Instead, he grows weary and is vexed by the girl. Eventually, Paul cures her. I wonder though if her healing was Paul’s primary concern.

At one level, the story in Acts is about people being set free. After all, many people gain their freedom. Paul and his companions are released from jail, the servant girl is freed from her demon, and the jailor and his family all experience some kind of release. But considering Paul’s full experience in Philippi, this incident with the girl raises more questions than it answers.

The 16th chapter of Acts records three distinct healing encounters between Paul and the people of Philippi. The first is with Lydia, the maker of fine purple cloth. You heard that

story last week. The other two encounters we hear about today.

Paul makes time to get know Lydia and the jailor. Out of those encounters, hospitality is extended. Paul is invited into people's homes, and then whole households are baptized. Paul does the hard work of relationship building with the wealthy woman and the jailor who holds power over Paul.

The story with this servant girl is different. Unlike the other two encounters, this girl is powerless and property of other wealthy people. Paul sets her free from the demon that possesses her, but the text is frustratingly silent whether she is set from her human captors. That's troubling.

What's also troubling is this. Paul heals her because he is annoyed with her. "Annoyed" is strong word. It is often associated with anger, which is another challenging emotion to tackle. In the all of the New Testament, the underlying Greek word for "annoyed" is used only twice. Both those times are in Acts. The only other occurrence happens when temple leadership grows "much annoyed" with Peter and John. Apparently, proclaiming Jesus and the power of the resurrection can be frustrating to insiders. Both times, this word is used to describe events that are troubling, especially for people who act on the wrong side of Jesus.

Unlike Lydia and the jailor, there is no attempt by Paul to engage with this girl. He

does not learn about her story. Being present with her is not Paul's concern. It's unclear if he even sees her as a beloved child of God. Instead, as one commentator bluntly puts it, the servant girl becomes Paul's tool.<sup>1</sup> He cures her so he can move on to more important matters. While the girl may be cured of the spirit, I'm not sure Paul actually heals her. That's also troubling. In our busy, over-scheduled world, Paul's challenges also reflect our challenges 2,000 years later.

Joey Ager recently said that, "the essence of liberation is dialogue."<sup>2</sup> Joey is a community organizer at the Church Council of Greater Seattle. Several weeks ago, he met with a group from Saint Mark's to talk about his work with the unhoused population in King County.

Joey said that true freedom, the kind with divine origins, ultimately is about connection. For real dialogue to happen, the kind that holds the possibility of transformation, a relationship is needed. Those kinds of close encounters are not just incidents on the way to somewhere else. Instead, divine connections form out of a deep, abiding sense of trust and care for the other. They take time to develop and require a commitment to sustain them. Only rarely does a fleeting, drive by encounter develop into that kind of lasting connection. That was Paul's misstep with this girl.

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<sup>1</sup>Gail R. O'Day, *Acts, in Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A Newsome and Sharon Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 400.

<sup>2</sup>Joey Ager, Lead Community Organizer for the Church Council of Greater Seattle) in a meeting at Saint Mark's Cathedral, April 13, 2019.

Jesus offers another way. His prayer in today's gospel grows out of that same deep connection Joey was talking about. Jesus utters this prayer on the eve of his arrest and trial. It is the final time he will pray with his disciples before his crucifixion and resurrection.

This parting prayer is one of the most intimate dialogues in all of scripture. That intimacy began before the foundations of the world were laid. That closeness continued during Jesus's public ministry with his closest disciples. And that connection will continue until the end of time with everyone who follows Jesus.

Jesus offers himself to God and gives thanks for his own glorification. But he does not pray only for himself. Jesus also prays for us. What Jesus asks is that everyone, throughout all time, share in same life giving, liberating connection with God.

Every year, the gospel appointed for this day comes from Jesus's high priestly prayer. It is fitting this prayer rounds out the Easter Lectionary. Liturgically and spiritually, the Church finds itself in liminal time, in between the Ascension and Pentecost. Many of us also find ourselves caught in between, longing for the eternal now but caught up in

frustration of not yet. It's hard to be caught in traffic, on the way to somewhere else, and not yet there.

But this prayer reminds us of something important. Divine encounters, the ones that hold the possibility for transformation, happen whether we think we've arrived or not. The divine connection with God is always there, including right now. We just need to slow down long enough to recognize it. What's more, that ongoing, divine encounter is the point of our existence. That's what it means to be one with God. That's why this prayer is so important not just at the end of the season but every day.

At the intersection of now and not yet, make time to connect with another person this week. Invite someone you don't know to share something meaningful with you. Then offer something about your own life. Ask curious questions about the passions of this person and listen without judgement as he or she describes what motivates them. Help them to name their hopes and discover what's common and different about your own hopes. When you are done, give thanks for each other, and then watch what happens next. You might discover you are closer to the kingdom of God than you thought.

**Acts 16:16-34:** *[With Paul and Silas, we came to Philippi in Macedonia, a Roman colony, and, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.]*

*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 are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as 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.*

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.]*



*Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!*