

**October 22, 2017**

**TEXT: Acts 16:16–24**

**TITLE: Suffer the Children**

*By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy*

Every 9 seconds during the school year, a public high school student drops out.

Every 24 seconds a child is arrested.

Every 37 seconds a baby is born into poverty.

Every 47 seconds a child is abused or neglected.\*

Paul had embarked upon a missionary journey to Macedonia and his first noted encounter was at the place of prayer outside the city of Philippi, where he met Lydian, a woman of prestige, wealth and power, a worshipper of God. Their encounter, leads to Lydia's and her household's full conversion as disciples' of Christ. Lydia is moved to open her home to Paul and Silas, extending radical hospitality, placing her wealth and prestige in service to the Lord.

Every 64 seconds a child is born without health insurance.

Every 75 seconds a child is born into extreme poverty.

Every 2 minutes a child is born at a low birthrate.

Every 3 minutes a child is born to a teen mother.

Paul and Silas continue and again are on their way to a place of prayer when they encounter a slave girl, a young woman—someone diametrically different from Lydia. The young woman was not a person of means; she was not a person of status or stature in the community. She was the possession of and enslaved by others. This young women was not respected or held in high esteem, instead she was exploited by her owners—older, nefarious men and probably taken advantage of by those who sought her out to tell their fortunes or futures. This young woman followed Paul and Silas for days and now she was haunting their prayer walk, crying out loudly, correctly declaring: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you<sup>\*</sup> a way of salvation.”

Although, this young woman was possessed by what was considered a demonic spirit, what she proclaimed was indeed true. On many occasions, Paul described himself as a slave or servant of Christ Jesus; possessed by the Spirit of God which directed and lead him. Likewise, it was often a demonic spirit that recognized Jesus as the son of God, as the one who came bring good news to the poor, to proclaim the release of the captives, to bring recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free (Luke 4:18).

However, after being followed around and called out for several days, Paul became annoyed, irritated, not necessarily at the young women, but by the spirit that dwelled within her.

Commentator Willie James Jennings states:

"Disciples can become addicted to such praise and affirmation and indeed can reinforce the exploitation of the enslaved by keeping them close only for their use-value...There is a deep connection between her god-talk and her fortune telling: both are inside the logic of exchange of spiritual power and material wealth...A demonic spirit is making use of her body just as her owners are making use of her." (Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Acts, 160)

Paul was not enamored by her continued pronouncement, but had grown weary and spoke to the spirit within the young woman: "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And at that very moment, the young girl was set free from the evil spirit that possessed her and yet she was still enslaved. She was still the property of the men who abused, used, and profited financially from her infirmity.

Every 4 minutes a child is arrested for a drug offense.

Every 9 minutes a child is arrested for a violent offense.

Every 32 minutes a child or teen is killed by guns.

I dare to say there has ever been a child born into the world who aspires to be a drug dealer, to take the life of another or have their life taken by a gun. I don't believe there has ever been a child born who decides, without provocation, to leave home to live on the streets, to be lured into human trafficking, to cut their bodies, become a crack cocaine or opioid addict. However, the statistic, the nightly news and our experiences tell us that is the reality for far too many children.

Children are sometimes faced with immeasurable burdens, especially when they are borne to parents who are: teenagers, or undereducated, or suffer from addiction, or are victims of abuse themselves or their families live in poverty. Children borne into circumstances beyond their control can become the victims of exploitation and oppression; at the mercy of those who have power over them or those who have abdicated their responsibility to them. This is the reality of far too many children.

Conversely, there are children borne into families of affluence, influence and means; some who live in beautiful, expensive homes, have all the material comforts their parent's wealth can buy, and yet they too can be flawed. Showered with material gifts, but never taught human decency, never shown how to be empathetic towards others, never realizing their wealth does not make them better than others, nor understand that to whom much is given, much is required. Instead they become narcissistic, self-serving and selfish, boorish and unfeeling human beings—suffering from "affluenza."

Leading to what we are experiencing in the country today. Rather than extending hospitality like Lydia, providing relief, protection and access, we are bombarded by meaningless and mean rhetoric such as: Subsidized health care is bankrupting the country; the right to own guns supersedes the need to legislate who should own guns or gun safety." The reality that for-profit jails are being built today based on the number of brown and black males in the third grade. The continued cries of: "they are taking our country, our heritage, and our rights away from us." The call for walls to be built to keep

the drugs, the criminals, the bad people out is the exchange for continuing subsidized healthcare for people who need it the most: children, the elderly, families and people living on poverty wages or subsidies. And instead of some Christians calling for the demonic spirits to come out of those elected and chosen to serve, they are standing with them as they divide, ostracize and espouse racism and bigotry.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, come out."

Every 23 minutes a child dies before his or her first birthday.

Every 32 minutes a child or teen dies from an accident.

Every 3 hours and 33 minutes a child or teen commits suicide.

Every 5 hours and 33 minutes a child is killed by abuse or neglect.

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to see beyond the pious, sanctimonious, religious sounding god-talk that is actually spoken to keep people oppressed, divided and in structures of servitude.

According to Willie James Jennings, "Paul was moved to speak, not by spiritual discernment or righteous indignation...He is simply and beautifully moved by annoyance...enough of the religious noise! Enough of the mindless praise of God and God's servants that mask demonic activity. The point was not to silence the young woman's voice, but to release it from its networked captivity." (*Ibid*)

In the Matthew 19 passage read by David, Jesus had had enough, when the disciples became annoyed, spoke sternly to the people and attempted to keep them from bringing their children that he might lay hands on them. Sisters and brothers, there is a time for righteous indignation, but this was not the time. Jesus intervened by saying, "suffer or let the little children come onto me, for such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matt.19:14)

Beloved, the kingdom of heaven belongs to the meek and humble, those with a child-like faith. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who clothe, feed, and shelter their brothers and sisters. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who welcome the stranger, open their homes to children in need of fostering or immigrants who have come from afar. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who call their representatives and strongly demand that healthcare, appropriate housing, nourishment, heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer should be afforded and affordable for everyone. The kingdom of heaven belongs to those who do for people the world considers the least: returning citizens, people in recovery, the child who has been exploited, oppressed, imprisoned or just simply made a mistake.

In the words of Marion Wright Edelman: "Beyond the charity and justice all faiths demand, all children need for faith institutions to speak and stand up for those who treat them unjustly."

Jesus never said, children should suffer, he very clearly stated, "Suffer the children: weary, worn, profiled, abused, oppressed broken, but loved beyond measure, let them to come unto me." That's what Jesus said, and contrary to what some of our siblings think, we are all God's children. May we all seek Jesus to be healed of our afflictions and know the hope, love and grace of God. Amen.

*\*statistics are taken from The Children's Defense Fund, Moments in America handout. Learn more stats about the state of children in America at: [www.childrensdefense.org/library/state-of-americas-children-each-day-in-america.html](http://www.childrensdefense.org/library/state-of-americas-children-each-day-in-america.html).*