

Demons are real, but, thanks be to God, miracles are real, too. Today's reading from Acts starts out with a possession and exorcism story that is analogous to those in the Gospels, although the slave-girl's owners' using her possession to make money is an interesting twist. I think the men who enslaved her would feel right at home in America today, where it feels like people will try anything to get what they want. But are we so different? We might think, sure, slavery is bad, but if this demon always tells the truth, what's the harm in that? Well, anything that gets people to do things they wouldn't normally do is very powerful, by definition, and demons are malevolent, by definition. You don't have to be a demon to consider how the selective use of the truth, or revealing secrets, can cause big trouble.

St. Luke throws some shade on St. Paul by pointing out that he allowed the possessed girl to follow him and his companions for "many days" and only freed her from its grip when he became "very much annoyed," which, knowing what we know of St. Paul's character, must have been a sight to behold. Maybe Paul waited because at first he kind of liked that it was accurately portraying their mission; maybe he thought it would help get attention, and even converts. Maybe it took him a while to realize that the girl was suffering terribly, a tortured soul made in the image of God and desperate for liberation. But ultimately, he did see beneath the surface, saw her humanity, loved her, and set her free.

The men who enslaved her never made that realization, and could only think of their lost income. I'm not one to see demons around every corner, but there's a demonic echo in how they use the truth to do great harm to Paul and Silas. They *were* disturbing the city, as the best evangelists do. Paul and Silas were Jews, which was not illegal, but they *were* advocating for customs that were neither Jewish nor pagan, which very well could have been construed as a violation of Roman law at that time. Ironically, part of the response, the severe flogging, was illegal to mete out on a Roman citizen like Paul, but things like that can happen in the heat of the moment.

As interesting as I find all of that, I'm even more interested in what happened in the prison. This is the second time in the Book of Acts when an apostle is freed from prison by divine intervention, and if I had been in Paul and Silas's place, I would have gotten the hell out of there. But perhaps they had heard about the earlier incident where an angel released St. Peter from prison, and Herod had the guards put to death. Perhaps we are witnessing the early church developing a new level of conscientiousness, a growing awareness of the potential unintended consequences of their acts and omissions.

So I find it miraculous not just that they were freed by supernatural means, but even more miraculous that they didn't immediately bolt, and not just that, but the other prisoners, who had been listening to them, also stayed in their places, all to spare their jailer. I can't imagine how hard that must have been, how much faith that took.

And then, to really drive the point home, yet another miracle occurs: the jailer and

his family all convert to Christianity, even though they knew better than anyone that you could get locked up for that. And immediately they start acting like Christians, showing hospitality to their former prisoners.

Never think that your personal Christian witness doesn't make a difference.

We could easily dismiss these stories as fabrications, exaggerations, or reminiscences of a unique period that will never come again, but I believe they are vital lessons for us today. Today, when the horror of multiple mass shootings is still fresh in our minds. The shootings themselves are unquestionably evil acts — one of the few things we still agree on in this country — though calling them demonic would obscure our insight into their origins, which we desperately need to understand. It's important to remember that they didn't come out of nowhere. These rampages were not spontaneous, but the end result of a lengthy process of descent into radicalization that does seem demonic to me.

Only in the most superficial sense do these shooters act alone. From what I've read, there are online groups encouraging both racially-motivated violence and school shootings. Think about that for a moment. There are people out there egging on the most desperate, alienated, and potentially dangerous members of our society and sharing their thoughts on how they can do the most damage. They even encourage shooters to livestream their attacks, and watch with live commentary.

Confronted with this level of depravity, my first thought is, couldn't I just take on a demon instead? That actually sounds easier and more pleasant. My second thought is, why isn't anyone already taking these groups on? If I know about them, then government officials and experts do, too. But all I hear are politicians and activists rehashing the same talking points about guns, promising or lamenting that our gun laws aren't going to change, and racking up as much money and attention as they can. The media make things even worse, sensationalizing the shootings, giving the shooters the attention they crave, and giving a platform to the same old people having the same old arguments.

Where are the Pauls and Silases? Where are the people willing to do the incredibly hard work of winning people over to a way of life based on love, and putting that message into practice by loving the people who are the very hardest to love?

Maybe some of them are sitting right here in Advent Church. You might not all be experts in the professional fields most relevant to this problem, but in my experience, you *are* experts in the practice of Christian love and grace. By the time people have become so determined to commit atrocities that they expect to lose their own lives in the process, it's extremely difficult to stop them. But I think we — you and I — actually can stop people from getting to that point by touching people before they go too far down the road that leads to that hellish place. People who feel loved, included, valued, and heard do not spiral into the deep darkness of the heart that makes them determined to do evil, and when it comes to making people feel loved, included, valued, and heard,

our parishioners lead the field.

That doesn't mean that this is an easy task. Let's be honest, there's usually a reason why these people were alienated from society. Sometimes multiple reasons. But it's important to remember that if people with good intentions don't reach out to people who are hard to love, people with evil intentions will. And if that happens, what does that say about us as Christians? If Paul and Silas could put the well-being of someone who had actively tormented them ahead of their own freedom, I can try to love people who are hard to love, and remember that underneath everything about them that repels me, there is a tortured soul made in the image of God and desperate for liberation.

That's why Jesus prayed that we all might be one. We Christians can only confront the demons of our age and accomplish miracles if we see past our differences and find our common identity and purpose in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit. We are not alone, which is crucial, because even the noblest human love is inadequate to the task of reconciling the world, but the love of God is more than capable, and the same love that unites the Father and the Son is also within us. That's how miracles happen: God's love can, will, and must save the world. Yes, Jesus will return to set all things right, but that's all the more reason for us to live as his faithful followers, practicing the utmost grace and love until he comes. We have what the world needs. In a world hungering for love, we share the riches of God's feast. In a world parched by death, we offer the water of life as a gift. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints, including us. Amen.