

Easter 7, Year C
May 8, 2016
St. Thomas

Good morning!

This morning, we celebrate a number of things.

This is, of course, Mother's Day.
And so today, whether you have given birth to a child,
or adopted a child,
or have consistently given a mother's love, selfless and boundless,
to another living being,
we honor you.

And speaking of mothers,
today also is the Feast Day of Dame Julian of Norwich,
who died on this day in 1416.
Dame Julian was a well-known mystic
who famously likened divine love to motherly love,
and who observed that God is both our father AND our mother.
She gave us some wonderful feminine imagery to use
when speaking of God,
so how fitting that today we honor her as well.

And finally, today is the seventh and last Sunday of Easter.
Today, as for the past six Sundays,
we've heard some of the wonderful stories of the early church
from the book of Acts.
During Eastertide we always substitute a reading from Acts
for the Old Testament lesson.
Next Sunday is Pentecost,
and then we'll hear the story from Acts about the birth of the church
in that rush of a mighty wind and tongues of fire.
I can't wait.

But today's lesson from Acts
is one that can leave people quite troubled.
I know it troubles me.

And so today, in honor of Dame Julian and mothers everywhere,
I think this is a really good Sunday
to dip our toe into the pool of feminist theology
and examine today's lesson from Acts through a lens
that the church, as a whole, is often reluctant to look through.
Now, I will assure you, there are OTHER ways to read this passage,
more traditional ways,
ways less likely to get the preacher into trouble.
But it seems to me that on THIS day,
this passage just cries out for a different perspective,
a woman's perspective, a mother's perspective.

Our story today is about the exploits of Paul and Silas in Macedonia.
It picks up where last week's story left off.

You'll recall that last week, Paul had a dream,
in which he saw a man from Macedonia pleading with him
to come there, to help them.
So he and Silas set sail.
They made their way to Phillipi, a leading city of Macedonia,
hunting for this man that Paul saw in his dream.

But who do they meet instead?
They meet a bunch of women,
including a Gentile woman named Lydia.
Lydia is a dealer in purple cloth,
and is apparently quite a wealthy woman.
She listened eagerly to what Paul had to say,
and then she and her whole household were baptized.
And not only that, she opened up her house to Paul and Silas
and began to fund their ministry.

The story of Paul and Lydia
is in many ways a counterpart to the story we heard two weeks ago
about Peter and Cornelius.
Remember Peter's vision about the sheet coming down,
and in it were all these creatures that Jews were forbidden to eat,
and Peter was told to kill them and eat them,
and he took that as a sign that he should reach out to Gentiles.

He wound up converting Cornelius, who was a Roman soldier, a Gentile.
 Lydia is the first official European convert,
 in the same way that Cornelius was the first official Gentile convert.

Now, this is good story-telling.
 Luke, who is the author of the Acts of the Apostles,
 as well as the Gospel of Luke,
 is a magnificent story-teller.
 The people in his stories are there to fulfill certain roles.
 And Lydia embodies Luke's *ideal*
 of women's contribution to the church.
 She listens ... when Paul talks.
 She provides housing and money,
 but she doesn't take on any leadership roles.
 She doesn't actually SAY anything.
 Am I making anyone squirm yet?

But the next woman that Paul encounters in Phillipi
 lives in a completely different world than Lydia.
 She is an unnamed slave girl
 whose owners exploit her gift of divination
 to make money for themselves.

By looking at the original Greek that this story was written in,
 we know that this spirit of divination
 is the same spirit that one encounters at the Oracle at Delphi.
 The Oracle was a position always held by a priestess
 - or female priest, as later generations prefer to be known -
 at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi.

During the heyday of the oracle,
 500 to a thousand years before Paul,
 she was undoubtedly the most powerful woman in the Classical world,
 and she was consulted on all sorts of important decisions.

Now, I don't know what that spirit was.
 I've read speculation that the oracle's prophecies
 may have been brought about by exposure to a gas
 coming from a crack in the earth
 that caused hallucinations.

Who knows?
I'm gonna say it's almost impossible
for a 21st century mind
to wrap itself around such ancient pagan beliefs.
But let's just be clear:
We're not talking about demon possession here.
This is something else.

And you can tell it's something else
because when Paul passes this woman in the streets of Phillipi,
she proclaims him to be a man of God,
preaching a path to salvation.
What's inaccurate about that?

Yet for some reason, this annoys Paul.
For some reason, a woman who speaks,
even a woman who undeniably speaks the truth,
isn't nearly as acceptable to our brother Paul
as a woman who eagerly LISTENS
while he man-splains to her.

My sisters, you and I know exactly how this went down, don't we?
This woman was talking too much.
Maybe she was shouting.
I'm guessing Paul and Silas found her "shrill."
Or "aggressive."
She certainly wasn't being demure and passive.
Whatever she was doing, it annoyed Paul.
He's busy trying to do whatever he came to do,
and listening to slave girls isn't on his agenda.
She's a distraction.

And so, he ... silences her.
He silences her in the name of Jesus.

He could have attempted to convert her,
but instead, he only silences her.

Now, the silencing of the slave girl
may simply reflect Luke, the storyteller's,

discomfort with the prophetic voice of women in the church.
 Luke silences women prophets all throughout the book of Acts.

Or this may be indicative
 of Paul's underlying unwillingness to hear women's voices.
 He is, after all, the one who wrote
 that women should keep silent in church
 and not attempt to teach the men anything.

Whatever the reason,
 once Paul silences the slave girl,
 she's forgotten.
 The focus of the story shifts
 to the loss of income her owners suffer
 because of her silence.
 The slave owners have Paul and Silas thrown in jail,
 which leads to a miraculous escape from prison,
 similar to Peter's earlier in Acts.
 Again, good story-telling.

But is it good ministry?
 What about this young girl's life afterward?
 Isn't she still a slave? Now a worthless slave?
 Why isn't Paul moved to help her
 beyond just freeing her from the spirit that gave her the power to speak
 truth?
 Why did Paul fail to challenge the system of *slavery* that held this girl bound
 every bit as much as the spirit of divination had?
 Paul doesn't even try to share the gospel with her.

Paul seems to be so wrapped up
 in his zeal to proclaim Christ crucified and risen,
 that he has forgotten the very people
 with whom Jesus himself spent so much time –
 the lost and forgotten and marginalized.

Now let's be fair.
 Paul was a man of his time,
 and we can't place 21st century sensibilities on 1st century characters.

Paul was on a mission.
 And freeing mouthy slave girls just wasn't part of that mission.
 He did a lot of other good things.

But this begs the question:
 What mission are we, as St. Thomas Church, on?
 What's at the heart of it?
 And what suffering slave girls may be annoying us?
 Who do we silence because their voices disturb us, or distract us?
 Would these marginalized people recognize US
 as slaves of the Most High God?

Yes, just like the slave girl and Paul,
 there are powers that keep us bound:
 old prejudices,
 systemic injustice that we don't even see but certainly benefit from,
 a need for security,
 fear that makes us strangers from one another,
 resentment that grips us and keeps us apart.
 We don't call these "demons" or "spirits,"
 but they are powerful and we need to be set free from them.

But on *this* Mother's Day
 when we celebrate so much that is good and kind and wonderful,
 I think it's right
 to let Dame Julian have the last word.
 For she, too, worried, like we do,
 about the powerful forces that enslave us.

"In my folly," she said,
 "I often wondered why,
 by the great foreseeing wisdom of God,
 the onset of sin was not prevented:
 for then, I thought, all should have been well. ..
 But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me,
 answered with these words and said:
 'It was necessary that there should be sin;
 but all shall be well,
 and all shall be well,

and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Amen.