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Disturbing the City

By Rev. Edgar F. Solís

Introduction:

I struggled a lot to write this Sunday message.

I couldn't find the inspiring illustration, the exemplary life of a role model, or a nice anecdote to share.

Every day of the week, I have experienced the tension that represents being a person of faith and living during this horrific tragedy that we all have heard.

I was tempted to say that there are no words.

I was so close to calling for a morbid silence as we contemplated the innocent faces of the victims of the massive shooting last Tuesday, May 24.

Yes, the tone today seems to be gloom and sad.

Prayers and thoughts are actions in the spiritual realm.

Still, such actions seem not to be enough to share a living hope for a nation that has experienced so many deaths and so putrid inaction from those responsible for the civil peace in our country.

Several times, Christians assume that our prayers and good deeds will, little by little, solve many of the problems of our society.

But today, we need to go beyond. Today, we need to move into action.

Actions are so relevant and potent that they can be seen as disturbing to the structures of evil, violence, and corruption in our society.

We just read about that in our New Testament reading

Bible Context:

In today's Bible passage, we're still in Macedonia, a community where new and exciting things happen for the apostle and new believers.

They're traveling around as a group.

They were teaching, praying, and engaging with the community in the usual Paul kind of way.

The narrative said that there is this person: a slave girl with a gift, a spirit of divination.

She runs after them announcing, "These men are the slaves of the Highest God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

The book of Acts states that day after day, she was there, with the same tagline, all day long.

Finally, Paul just snapped. And he turned and healed her. What happened here?

Well, the owners of the slave girl just lost their meal ticket, and they aren't happy.

The preaching notes on the UMC Discipleship Web pages states: They have Paul and the team arrested and invent some charges that may be based on truth, but probably not.

Paul and his team are stripped as a way of publicly humiliating them, they are beaten as a way of extracting a pound of flesh for the loss of income, and they are thrown into the inner jail.

What did the people of faith do as they were struggling? They start singing hymns.

Yes, they were able to strengthen their spirituality amid the most challenging circumstances.

I wonder what the other prisoners thought about this expression of spiritual power.

Then the earthquake happened – a manifestation of nature that coincidentally happened at that moment.

But no one escaped. All of them remained in the place.

Then the jailer brings light into their darkness and kneels before the men he probably treated severely earlier and says, *“I want what you have that causes you to act as you did here.”*

The jailer might think it was strange, out of the ordinary, unsettling – that their behavior was not normal. Others in the community might say it was offensive to the status quo – they upset the city.

But beloved church, the reality is that when God’s people manifest Jesus’s presence in the community, more than a simple paranormal phenomenon happens.

Theological reflection:

We have an enormous challenge today!

Christian author Christopher B. Hays in his book *God and Guns: The Bible against American Gun Culture*, states: “We are in the midst of a deadly epidemic. It has swept through countless public places, affecting all of us and killing thousands. In individual outbreaks related to gatherings for school or a concert, dozens have wound up dead. We are speaking, of course, of gun violence, which killed almost 40,000 Americans in 2017, the most recent year for which there is complete data, and wounded about 100,000 more. These numbers are rising. Guns now cause more deaths in the United States than auto accidents.”

And again, are we listening to God during this time?

If we don’t want to hear politicians, mental health professionals, experts in sociology, or spiritual leaders, it is OK. But can we listen to God? Can we?

Many could say that God is not speaking at all, but is that the case?

I am pretty sure why God is saying no words right now; either God is crying or is angry – so angry!

So, we better listen to God's silence so well and so hard that without a doubt, we act right now. We act in line with the highest standards of justice so that we can show the world that The United States of America's exceptionalism exists only to demonstrate God's presence for what is good, just and right in the world!

Conclusion and call to action:

What practical lesson can we take from today's Bible passage?

Slide 4

1. Let's face the oppressive systems of the world.

The apostle's encounter with the girl represents the clash of the abusive and corrupt systems of the world – structures that use innocent people to take advantage and make a profit – with the kingdom of God that is spreading the good news of God, the good news of freedom, justice, love, and compassion.

Let's be aware that the presence of God's people in the community will bring stress, problems, and challenges.

That's precisely what happens with the believers in the book of Acts, and that's exactly what Jesus did, through his presence, message, and actions.

Jesus broke the old and abusive systems of the world to bring freedom and justice.

Then, let's cause some good trouble out there!

Let's face the structures that are making a profit from the elite business of violence!

Let's defy the incredibly lax gun laws!

Do you know that in most of The United States, it is easier for 14-year-olds to get an assault weapon than cigarettes?

That's madness!

When we want to obey God rather than men, we can be sure that we will shake and disrupt the status quo.

Many times miracles come from outside of the agenda and outside of the normal.

In the world, we'll face the rotten and corrupt system that many times invokes the name of God to promote false rights – a lousy and crafty structure that earns money at the expense of the suffering of innocents.

Their only interest is in making a profit, regardless of the violence and the unjust and cruel acts that produce their ideology and their artifacts!

2. Let's develop our spirituality in the times of Challenges.

The apostles and believers shared the good news against the powers to be, and they were thrown into jail.

Let's consider that when we preach the liberation message of the Gospel.

The world's corrupt system gets confronted, and they will never hesitate to strike back against the church.

But let's keep in mind that the manifestation of the church in the world is not when we come every Sunday to worship God with beautiful music and fantastic programs of religious entertainment.

The actual manifestation of God's presence in the church is when we are able, through the power of God, to transform the awful reality of a cruel, unjust, and brutal reality into a better world of compassion!

And that will bring opposition, pain, and suffering.

When you are willing to love, you also are willing to suffer.

Today we need to do whatever it takes on our part so that not one more single person – child, woman, or man - dies at the hands of a mentally unstable person, a terrorist, a white supremacist, or an angry sociopath just because one of these persons can kill since guns are so easily acquired.

I believe that the God of Love, grace, compassion, justice, and inclusion is against the perversive idea of the culture of violence.

Dear Church, change is hard. That's the point, and it will be resisted.

We need to start to be change-makers, change bringers.

We will probably be resisted, ignored, and maybe even persecuted. Yet we will persist.

We will bring change: a new kingdom, a new way of living as the human community.

The prince of peace is with us!

This week, we seem to have fallen back on social patterns of horror and unspeakable terror, but dear Church, GOD has called us to disturb the inadequate reality and challenge the status quo.

Put this in your mind and heart: The charge against the first-century believers was: "These people are turning the world upside down."

Let's be about disturbing. But let's bring another kind of disruption – disruption of Love, disruption of peace, and nonviolence – a disruption that confronts the powers that be.

Let's connect people with God.

Let's, build a welcoming and inclusive community, serving our neighbors through actions of justice and love, and develop disciples of Jesus Christ. Amen!