

Prayer:

“About Midnight, Paul & Silas Were Praying...”

“Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World.” You’ve seen it before. At least if you are a part of The United Methodist Church. That is our mission statement. It defines us, directs us, empowers us. At least that is the plan, the agenda behind such a statement. But where does it come from and what does it really mean?

I don’t know where you stand on mission statements. Some consider them essential; others find them distracting from the day-to-day work. Or maybe it is the creation of them that is so distracting. I feel like we don’t need a mission statement, as we already have one. “Go into all the world,” said Jesus. “That’s pretty mission oriented,” “Love God, love neighbor”—can’t get a better mission than that. “Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God; sounds like something Jesus would affirm. Why do we need a mission statement? We just need to claim the one already given to us.

I’ve come to understand that to claim that statement, that fundamental belief of who we are as a church, as a community of faith in a particular place and time, we need to make it ours. How are we going to make that mission from our Lord into that which gets Fifth Ave. UMC feet and hands and hearts moving? That’s the real process of shaping a mission statement.

As we look at our text, I see a connection between our denominational statement and this text from the Acts of the Apostles. Maybe only in a tangential way, but it seems compelling to me.

Our text continues the story from last week. We’re still in Macedonia, it appears. We’re traveling around as the “we” group. We were teaching and praying and engaging with the community in the usual Paul kind of way. But then there is this person. An irritant, really. A buzzing fly that just won’t leave them alone. A slave girl, with a gift, a spirit of divination. And she runs after them, like an annoying kid sister who keeps tagging along, wanting to be one of the cool kids. And she announces, no, she divines good stuff, stuff that Paul would have said himself. “These men are the slaves of the Most-High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.”

Who could be upset by that? They’re getting free advertising. They’ve got a P.R. manager running in front of them. What a deal! Except it didn’t feel like a deal. Her enthusiasm short-circuited any conversation that they might want to have. The big reveal was revealed too soon. Day after day, she was there, with the same tagline, like a bad commercial that keeps running in every break, all day long. Finally, Paul just snapped. And he turned and healed her. Just like that. He cast out that spirit of divination, effectively shutting her up for good.

Then it hits the fan; the owners of the slave girl just lost their meal ticket, and they aren’t happy. They have Paul and team arrested and invent some charges that may be based on truth, but probably not. They 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.

Naturally, they start singing hymns, perhaps “The Old Rugged Cross,” “How Great Thou Art,” “Amazing Grace”—Luke has a solo on that one. All the hits. They sing them through their facial contusions and over the creaking of their broken bones; they sing rather than moan; they sing rather than complain; they sing. And the other prisoners locked away there in that rat-infested darkness listen to them sing and decide they are either crazy or saints, maybe something of both.

Then the earthquake happened. A natural occurrence? Well, sure. Earthquakes happen. But it’s funny how Luke describes the effect. He says the chains were unfastened. Not the chains were shattered, or pulled from the wall, or any other accidental freeing effect. He says unfastened. Interesting, don’t you think?

And no one seizes the moment and runs for freedom. The gospel singers and their appreciative audience sit there in the rubble patiently waiting for whatever might be next. When they hear the scream from the jailer and metallic unsheathing of the sword and the ragged breathing of a man on the brink of despair, Paul shouts out. “We’re all here,” put away your sword. Then the jailer brings light into their darkness and kneels before the men he treated like dirt earlier in the day and says, “I want what you have that causes you to act like you did here.”

It was strange, out of the ordinary, unsettling. Their behavior was not normal. It was offensive to the status quo; they were upsetting the city. It was a part of transforming the world.

We all want to leave our mark on this world—to know that our life mattered.

What does it mean to leave a legacy? It means putting a stamp on the future, and making a contribution to future generations. People want to leave a legacy because they want to feel that their life mattered. Once you know what you want your legacy to be, you can start building it.

Change is hard; that’s the point; and it will be resisted. But if we embrace the mission statement, then we are change makers, change bringers. And we will be resisted, and ignored, and maybe even persecuted. Yet we will persist; we will bring change, bring a new Kin-dom, a new way of living as the human community. We will struggle with it, and sometimes will get it wrong. Paul’s response to the girl who annoyed him is hardly worthy of the Christ he proclaims, even if the result was a positive one. Yet, will continue, however, to be worthy of the gospel we proclaim.

But we are in the business of disturbing the inadequate peace, challenging the status quo. As we wait for the Holy Spirit, the charge gets even better: The people of God are called to turn the world upside down. What better legacy could we leave? We who are making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world? Let’s be about disturbing. Amen.