

They Were Noticed

June 1, 2025

Acts 16:16-34

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Two weeks ago the Sunday School made some presentations to the teachers who've worked with them during this school year. I was one of those honored. They were kind enough to say they were nuts about me, which really touched my heart. They gave me nuts, too.

They also gave me this insulated travel mug bearing these words: "Difference Maker: A dedicated individual who can make a big impact even with just a small action or few words. Someone who makes a difference in the lives of others."

Difference maker.

That's what I've wanted to be since I was a small child. I went through a number of ways to make a difference: I wanted to be a firefighter, a doctor, a scientist, a teacher, an actor, and some others before I followed a call to ministry. Which, you'll notice, is a profession that seeks to make a difference.

Whether I have or not, whether I do or not, is something we can debate. I've got to tell you, there are days it feels like the world is going on without paying any attention to me at all. Sometimes that's just fine. Other times, I desperately wish I could change the course of events.

The Apostle Paul along with Silas and some other companions had been in Philippi for a few days. We read of their work and welcome from the Jewish community in the city last week. Lydia, a leader among them, hosted them in her own home.

The woman described in this story came from much further down the social spectrum. She was a slave – Luke didn't know or didn't record her name – and she was a person afflicted by demonic possession. It doesn't really matter whether the first century diagnosis or a twenty-first century diagnosis of severe mental illness was actually correct. She was doubly bound as an enslaved person and as someone who could not control her own speech and actions.

As Jaclyn P. Williams writes at Working Preacher, "One who needed freedom could clearly call out the source of salvation but could not so clearly embrace that salvation. The same spirit that oppressed her could see the presence of the way of redemption—the way that is Jesus Christ. It is also meaningful that she refers to Paul and Silas as 'slaves of the most high God' (verse 17) while she was enslaved by the spirit of divination and those who were taking advantage of her torment."

She may have been doubly bound, but she made a difference. She made a difference to her owners, who sold her words as predictions of the future. She made a difference to those who purchased her words, or so we assume, because people kept paying for them. She made a difference to Paul, because when she followed and shouted at him over a few days he got annoyed.

You know, I really wish Paul had exorcised the demon for better reasons than pique, but that's how Luke told the story, so what can I do?

Paul and Silas, up to this point, hadn't made much of a ripple in Philippi. They'd made friends among the Jewish community, but that was a small group in a big city. The rest of the population didn't notice them. Until...

Paul got annoyed, and healed a young woman, and cut off her owners' source of income. That made a difference.

Suddenly they were noticed.

Eric Barreto writes at Working Preacher, "Gripped with avarice, the formerly profitable girl's owners accuse Paul and Silas of profound treachery before the city's ruling authorities. Notice, however, that their indictments fail to mention one key piece of evidence: the loss of the unnamed slave girl's services in a lucrative endeavor! Instead, these rapacious merchants resort to the tried and true method of base ethnocentrism. They accuse Paul and Silas of drawing Philippi's denizens away from the approved Roman way of life to Jewish customs incommensurate with the city's ethnic values. Of course, the charges are false."

The charges may have been false, but the magistrates found them guilty. They imposed the punishments given to people who were not citizens of Rome, which would have been most people at this time in the first century.

Jerusha Matsen Neal writes at Working Preacher, "Acts 16 narrates a leveraging of cultural superiority and social fear for the preservation of an economic system that grounds the status quo. The torture, beatings, and social isolation of prison are powerful technologies in that mechanism. Paul and Silas are not imprisoned because they break a law. They are imprisoned because they are imprisonable people—vulnerable people—who threaten the bottom line of the powerful."

If you want to be noticed, if you want to make a difference, if you want to change the future: threaten the bottom line of the powerful.

You may not enjoy the attention. Paul and Silas didn't. Is there a way of making a difference that does not incur the baleful attention of the wealthy, the powerful, the ones with entrenched interests? I'm not sure there is.

Greed is never satisfied. The author known simply as “The Preacher” wrote in Ecclesiastes 5: “The lover of money will not be satisfied with money, nor the lover of wealth with gain. This also is vanity.” Last week I shared some figures compiled by Robert Reich about the budget bill currently before the Senate. The richest .1%, said Dr. Reich, would receive a \$390,000 tax cut on average. What I hadn’t checked was how much they earn in the first place.

According to James Royal of Bankrate, in 2022 average earnings for the top .1% were \$2.8 million. So they’d be adding 1.3% to their income with the tax cut. Not shabby, I suppose, but hardly dramatic.

At the same time, those earning less than \$17,000 will lose about \$1,000, 5.8% of their income. They’ve got a lot less to lose.

I’m probably as annoyed as the Apostle Paul was two thousand years ago. I wish I had the power to heal these people double chained by poverty, illness, circumstance, or oppression. I wish I had the power to free people who are chained to their greed, because that’s a harsh bond as well.

Most of all, though, I hope I make a difference. I hope I make things difficult for the ones who exploit others. I hope I make things difficult for those who deprive people of their liberties. I hope I make things difficult for those who use lies and distortions to get their way.

Paul and Silas were noticed. May we be noticed, too.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson