

Yr. C, Easter 7
May 29, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1539 Words

Lessons: Acts 16:16-34
Psalm 97
Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
John 17:20-26

“O God...do not leave us comfortless.”

What a timely prayer we have for our opening collect on this 7th Sunday of Easter, the week of the worst school massacre in a decade. Well, now, that’s pathetic in and of itself, isn’t it—the brutally, cold, hard fact that there’s been *more than one school massacre* in a decade...and the atrocious fact that there *has been a school massacre* even more deadly?

Why? Why is our ‘one nation under God’ choosing to live like this? Why is our ‘one nation under God’ *choosing* to let our children die like this?

Make no mistake—it *is* a choice.

It is always a choice to do *nothing* when something *needs to be done*. It is always a choice to do *too little* when a lot more *needs to be done*. It is a choice to distract from, or delay, what are achievable, good, common sense, helpful protections which—*frankly*—are popular with our electorate.

That’s usually what you need in a democracy, after all—ideas that are popular...*unless* you have enough money, power, and control over politicians to keep everything just like it is.

“O God...do not leave us comfortless.”

Paul and Silas showed up in Philippi and were minding their own business. They were going to the place of prayer.

Do you know what has been true for thousands of years? The fact that you can generally avoid getting into trouble if you just keep your thoughts and prayers to yourself. *A lot of people* see the wisdom in that—people like you and me.

Jesus did not! He didn’t keep *anything* to himself. Jesus Christ was in the middle of *everything*...but the road.¹ Sure, he blessed the poor, the sick, the lame, the hungry, the dirty, and the vulnerable; but he also confronted the powerful, the wealthy, the religious leaders, and the government leaders—over and over again—out loud, in their faces, telling the truth, and challenging their hypocrisy for doing *nothing* or for doing *too little* to help the poor, sick, lame, hungry, and vulnerable people of *his nation under God*.

Our Lord, Jesus Christ did *not* keep his thoughts and prayers to himself.

Well, neither did Paul and Silas. Right there, in the public square, St. Paul called out the demon in their midst. He set the oppressed slave girl free at last. Well, her owners did not thank God Almighty for her new freedom. Their ‘gravy train’ had just been stopped on its tracks. They were furious because that slave-girl had been making them a fortune. When you separate people from the money they *think* they are entitled to...watch out...things will get dangerous very fast...*as they did* for Paul and Silas.

The slave owners took them to court. “These men are disturbing our city,” they complained. “They are *Jews*.”

¹ I first heard this spoken by the Rev. A. Richard Smith, at The School of Theology: Sewanee, circa 2004.

That! That anti-Semitic slur could just as easily have been shouted yesterday in *this nation under God*. It is precisely what the gunman in Pittsburgh expressed with his ice cold, heart when he massacred 11 innocent people at the Tree of Life Synagogue in 2018.

It's the *very same kind of hatred* that led another young man into a grocery store in Buffalo, NY just two weeks ago to murder as many black people as he possibly could in the shortest amount of time.

It's the hatred that inspired yet another young man to enter Mother Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston and assassinate the pastor and eight of his black, faith-filled parishioners.

And we, *the people*, allow these men to buy military grade assault weapons. *We*, the people, enable them to purchase super-sized clips of ammunition. We let eighteen-year-olds who cannot legally buy beer, purchase AR-17's. We let unlicensed dealers sell guns online and at gun shows without any background checks. *No questions asked*. Did you know that we also allow people who are on the terrorist watch list and the 'no fly list' to buy the weapons of their choice?

"O God, do not leave us comfortless."

They beat the ever-living breath out of Paul and Silas. The crowd joined in—beat them with rods as hard as they could. They lynched 'em, right there in the middle of town.

We know all about that, don't we?

In *this* one nation under God, a whole lot of people have been lynched...for being in the wrong place...or saying the wrong words...or giving the wrong impression...or just having the wrong-colored skin. It might seem unlikely in this 21st century, but violent, vengeful people with nearly unfettered access to lethal weapons are attacking everywhere.

Just ask the members of Congress who ran for their lives last year when the insurrectionist mob attacked our Capitol in a rampage.

Ask the grieving families of the 49 individuals whose lives were stolen from them in Orlando just because they were gay.

Ask the friends of the 31 students cut down in the prime of life at high schools in Parkland, Florida; Houston, Texas; and Oxford, Michigan—just to name a few of the largest massacres in the last four years.

Ask the people at Tanglewood Middle School, right here in Greenville, from just two months ago.

"O God, do not leave us comfortless."

They threw Paul and Silas in prison—locked them in the deep, dark heart of that prison so they could not escape...shackled them like slaves with their feet in the stocks.

Here's what I want you to notice: Paul and Silas *still* did not keep their thoughts and prayers to themselves. In the middle of the night—in the deepest darkest hour of night—they refused to be silenced. Paul and Silas prayed and sang out loud for those with ears to hear. They did not bite their tongues. They did not hold back. They proclaimed the Good News of God Almighty in word and example, *just like we are called to do*.

If we will just *begin* by praying in thought, maybe we'll find the courage to pray with words. And then, *maybe*—if we dig deep—we'll find the courage to pray with actions, just like Jesus did—over and over again—showing us how it's done.

Suddenly, on that dark night, there was an earthquake. It was *so powerful* that the foundations of the prison shook...the iron doors flung wide open...the chains burst apart. Thank God Almighty, Paul and Silas were free!

Sitting there, in the most hopeless, innermost cell...at the deepest, darkest hour of the night...Paul and Silas—our forebears in the faith—discovered their freedom, and they *used it* for goodness' sake!

St. Paul, who—*himself*—had been a violent man, shouted out in a loud voice to the jailer, and said, “Do not harm yourself.” Paul used his freedom to stop the prison guard from killing...himself. Paul used his freedom to stop the violence.

Dear people of God, Robb Elementary is *your earthquake*. Do you feel shaken up?

Sandy Hook Elementary was our earthquake. Did we feel shaken back then?

Columbine High School was our earthquake. Virginia Tech was our earthquake. Las Vegas was our earthquake. Binghamton, NY; San Bernardino, CA; Sutherland Springs and El Paso, Texas. They were *all* earthquakes.

We keep getting *shaken up*, but we are not acting like Paul and Silas. We are not using our freedom to stop the violence!

The chains are burst wide open. The doors are flung wide. It's time to use our freedom for *goodness' sake*. It's time to stop keeping our thoughts and prayers *to ourselves*, and start acting more like Jesus...and Paul...and Silas.

It is time for us to shout out to *our one nation under God* and say, DO NOT HARM YOURSELF! It's time to tell our leaders to STOP THIS VIOLENCE—*DO SOMETHING*, because doing nothing is no longer a choice that we, your voters, will tolerate.

“O God, do not leave us comfortless, but send us your Holy Spirit to strengthen us...”

Strengthen us to *do* your peaceful will on earth as it is in heaven. Strengthen us to *stand up* for the innocent who have been slain and cannot stand. Strengthen us to *speak out* for the children who have been silenced and cannot speak.

Strengthen us to get involved in challenging those who would like to do nothing, and push them to pass achievable, good, common sense, helpful, *and* popular changes to our laws and at least *try* to save some lives.

Let us pray: We know your will, heavenly Father, because we see it *so plainly* in the life of Jesus Christ, your loving, caring, *and outspoken* Son. May we be one as You are one.

May we come together and show forth the love you have for this world—loudly and clearly—for those with ears to hear.

You have shaken us up. You have set us free. Inspire us to *use our freedom* in order to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. Give us strength to *use our freedom* for goodness' sake. Give us courage to stop keeping our thoughts and prayers to ourselves.

“O God, do not leave us comfortless.”

Amen.