



**First Congregational Church of Ashfield ❖ United Church of Christ**  
***Creating Community, Welcoming All***

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“Salvation from False Prayers”

Rev. David Jones

When I lived in Canada, I would look on in disbelief at news of another shooting in America. Now that I live here, and even when I have a teacher at home—even as we anticipate having a child here—I am alarmed to realize how normal what happened this past week now feels. I am alarmed to realize how little I felt at all.

There was a moment on Thursday at Bible Study—after almost an hour of discussion on this passage from Acts, that went on without any mention of what happened in Texas—that one of our Deacons actually had to gently request I take at least a moment to lift up prayers for the people of Uvalde, and for the children and parents of Robb Elementary. I realized that I have spent more time this past week regretting prayer than feeling like doing it. We do have to pray, that is a part of any faith community’s response. We can pray even as we take note of those who seem to *only* pray at a time like this, as if to deflect from taking any meaningful action. We can pray ourselves, and still recognize that there are too many false prayers in this country, in this time of shame and sorrow.

“False prayers” sounds like an awfully judgmental thing to say. But as we see in our reading from Acts this morning, there is precedent for becoming annoyed at some prayers. Even as Paul and Silas are spreading the good word of love and freedom and justice for all, a woman, enslaved to powerful owners, follows them and cries out for all to hear, making her own proclamations of who Paul and Silas really are and what their up to in Rome.

In our study on Thursday, the group of us were confused about what exactly this woman was doing and why it so annoyed Paul. It was illegal at this time for men like Paul and Silas, as people of the Jewish faith, to try and convert Roman citizens. So maybe this woman, who Paul decides is possessed by an evil spirit, is trying to get them into trouble, trying to expose their secretive work. On the other hand, what she actually proclaims would seem to support their authority, as if she—or the spirit within her—is trying to assist them in their mission. Or, maybe this confrontation has less to do with what the woman is saying or trying to accomplish, and more to do with the relationship of her words to the power and profit of her owners. Maybe what is demonic or evil about this woman’s actions—what annoys Paul—is how the spirit has been subjugated to the power of the violent men who own her.

Whatever exactly is going on here between the slave girl and Paul, this encounter has the effect of throwing Paul and Silas far off course. The passage tells us that they were on the path to a place of prayer; after this encounter, they are seized and taken to a marketplace to answer to the authorities.

Maybe what annoys Paul is the misuse of the spirit of prayer to make money. And it is this instance and occasion of injustice that forces Paul to wield the power of Christ overtly instead of covertly, to drive out this false spirit in public. So instead of arriving at a place of prayer, the brutal and violent conditions of the world confront them, and throw them off their course.

But though Paul and Silas arrive in a physically different place, they keep faith with their mission. Even though they have been badly mistreated, and subjected to violence; even though they have been unjustly imprisoned, they pray and they sing. And when an earthquake shakes the foundations of the prison and would set them free, Paul and Silas decide not to leave. They decide to stay, even though they could go. They do not stay because they agree with their treatment or their sentence. They do not stay because they are cowardly, and afraid to take the steps to freedom that have been opened to them.

They stay because they already are free—they never stopped being free despite being jailed—and they have an opportunity now to care even for their jailer. Where prayers for power and profits are false, and throw us off course, prayers of compassion and love and in the service of freedom and life for all keep us in the grace of God no matter what the powers of this world are really up to.

So Paul and Silas stay, to fulfill and demonstrate their faith in their great mission. In the last act of this story, we see how authentic converts are won. By not prioritizing themselves over others, by not losing themselves in the face of violence—by not confusing God’s power and God’s will with the brutal and violent powers of their society; by loving and caring and responding to the people that are placed in front of them—Paul and Silas manage to set even their own jailer free. The story finally concludes with the outward signs of true faith: the healing and binding up of wounds; safe shelter and a place to rest; kinship and community built on compassion and service; food for everyone, hospitality at a shared meal; and rejoicing at the gift and glory of life here and now that God has freely given to us all. True faith like birds flying high, sun in the sky, breeze drifting on by, a new dawn and a new day, a new life for each of us. A faithful community has no slaves, no owners, no prisoners, no jailers. And it is this true faith—and this path to a place of prayer, this garden, this holy city—that we have to answer to.

I find myself at a loss this morning. I’m not interested in talking about policy, or statistics, I’m not here to propose a solution to this unique American problem; I do not wish to place myself or this sanctuary into a marketplace of constrictive partisan debates. And I know why I didn’t turn to prayer right away this week, and I know why I didn’t feel much of anything when the news of the slaughter of children *again* broke. Because this is a time of shame and sorrow, of real prayers and false ones, but it is not yet a time of change. The scriptures say that the outward signs of true faith are healing, housing, food, and joy for every last one of God’s children. Do these signs describe America today? How could anyone say that they do? So I confess that I do not believe for a second that new laws, passed or left to languish, will succeed in driving out the rotten spirit of gun violence in this country; how could they, when the rotten spirit of violence permeates so much of American life, when so few get the treatment and care they need, when so many are unhoused, when hunger and despair are endemic in our communities? Our country does not resemble the acts of the apostles.

So I’m afraid that we know too well where this is headed. That’s why I don’t care to talk about policy—no matter how clear it is that we need a new policy. In a few weeks, a few months, everyone apart from those in Uvalde will forget this, because this country is not ready to change. It seems we need our own exorcism and our own earthquake—we need to be confronted with a truer faith.

So I want to turn again to, and end with, the words of Bobby Kennedy. He was an imperfect man, but in his life there is evidence that growth and change are possible. His reputation for ruthlessness as a young attorney general gave way after the death of his brother and Martin Luther King to a startling capacity for compassion. Confronted by the brutal and unrelenting violence of our society in 1968, he did not focus on a single policy, he did not scold people who think differently than him, he did not get thrown off course. He answered to a higher calling. Before he too was taken by the violence of this country, he said with the same true faith of Paul and Silas:

*“[T]his much is clear, violence breeds violence, repression brings retaliation, and only a cleaning of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls.*

*“For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions; indifference and inaction and slow decay. This is the violence that afflicts the poor, that poisons relations between men because their skin has different colors. This is a slow destruction of a child by hunger, and schools without books and homes without heat in the winter.*

*“This is the breaking of a man's spirit by denying him the chance to stand as a father and as a man among other men. And this too afflicts us all. [...] When you teach a man to hate and fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies he pursues, when you teach that those who differ from you threaten your freedom or*

*your job or your family, then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies - to be met not with cooperation but with conquest, to be subjugated and mastered.*

*"We learn, at the last, to look at our brothers as aliens, men with whom we share a city, but not a community, men bound to us in common dwelling, but not in common effort. We learn to share only a common fear - only a common desire to retreat from each other - only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force. For all this there are no final answers.*

*"Yet we know what we must do. It is to achieve true justice among our fellow citizens. [...] The question is whether we can find in our own midst and in our own hearts that leadership of human purpose that will recognize the terrible truths of our existence.*

*"We must admit the vanity of our false distinctions among men and learn to find our own advancement in the search for the advancement of all. We must admit in ourselves that our own children's future cannot be built on the misfortunes of others. We must recognize that this short life can neither be ennobled or enriched by hatred or revenge.*

*"Our lives on this planet are too short and the work to be done too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in our land. Of course we cannot vanish it with a program, nor with a resolution.*

*"But we can perhaps remember - even if only for a time - that those who live with us are our [siblings], that they share with us the same short movement of life, that they seek - as we do - nothing but the chance to live out their lives in purpose and happiness, winning what satisfaction and fulfillment they can.*

*"Surely this bond of common faith, this bond of common goal, can begin to teach us something. Surely we can learn, at least, to look at those around us as fellow men and surely we can begin to work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again."*

Alleluia and amen.