

People Over Profits  
Acts 16:16-34  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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There's a story from the Jewish Midrash that Cameron Trimble recently shared in her newsletter "Piloting Faith." As you might know, the Jewish Midrash is a group of stories told by rabbis to help explain and interpret scripture. This one is about the Tower of Babel, a story we find in the book Genesis.

It goes like this, "The builders of the tower were determined to create something so vast, so towering, that it would reach the heavens. They believed this would secure their legacy, their greatness, their safety. It wasn't enough to live well on the earth — they wanted to conquer the sky itself.

"As the tower grew, the work became brutal. The laborers were pushed harder. The higher the tower reached, the more dangerous the work became. If a worker fell to their death? No one flinched. But if a brick was dropped, construction halted until it was replaced. The bricks mattered more than the people. The project became more important than the lives it consumed (Cameron Trimble, "When the Cracks Appear: Facing Collapse with Open Eyes and Open Hearts", April 8, 2025, Piloting Faith: An (Almost) Daily Meditation, <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/when-the-cracks-appear-facing-collapse>).

And it isn't only in that ancient project that such things can be said. Too often over the course of history *and* in our lives today, profits are valued over people...productivity is required instead of rest...the almighty dollar, and the power that comes with it, is treated as the goal with people being merely a means to that end.

In today's story there is so much going on. Again we are reading in Acts, as Paul and his companions continue to carry the good news of Jesus out into the world. And it is easy for us to read past much of this story and simply to pay attention to the miraculous parts. Whether they amaze or confuse us, things like earthquakes that open prison doors and shake off chains, they get our attention. And as we read through Acts and witness the spread of the Jesus movement, the ending of this story with more people being baptized as followers of Jesus may be all we remember.

In fact, the beginning of the story - when Paul calls the spirit to leave the slave girl - it may only seem like a means to an end itself, like a way to get Paul and Silas into prison which leads us to the jailer's conversion.

But, what happens if we pause with the people, especially the less valued people, in this story? What if we pay attention, not only to Paul, but to those he encounters?

Because the story begins by naming something that we should take note of. The slave-girl in this story has a particular ability: she can predict the future. But did you notice that this ability is neither celebrated nor criticized for what it can offer, it is simply named as something that makes money for her owners.

See, no one is really paying attention to this young woman. She is a slave. She is property. She is a tool for her owners' benefit. *She* is seen as a means to an end, not as a valued child of God.

And honestly, we often don't even challenge that. After all, as Luke writes this story and tells us about Paul's reaction to her, he says, "Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!' At that moment the spirit left her" (Acts 16:18, NRSVUE).

Even Paul doesn't stand up for this young woman. He doesn't confront her owners with a critique of the slavery in which she is captured. He doesn't go on a diatribe about how they are taking advantage of her. Rather, Luke only tells us that he reacts because he is annoyed as she continues to follow them around.

But what if, as Episcopal Priest Whitney Rice suggests, the annoyance didn't come from her obnoxious behavior or from the fact that she was likely stealing some attention away from Paul, but what if "this woman was an ever-present reminder of the very injustice she was undergoing. Slaves were supposed to be quiet and unobtrusive, like sentient furniture, living bodies that could anticipate and do your will without your having to engage them as human beings. This woman trapped in slavery would not be silent. And when oppressed people refuse to be silent, people with the power to do something about that oppression, who don't really want to deal with it, get very annoyed" ([Liberated, Easter 7 \(C\) - 2019 – The Episcopal Church](#)).

What if Paul - our hero of this story - really only responded because the reminder of injustice was what annoyed him?

Perhaps we can acknowledge that possibility. Because we, too, know what it is to be reminded of the injustice around us. And, if we are honest, we know what it is to prefer to walk a different direction, to put on headphones and not have to hear the questions that are asked, to simply not see the ones who are naming or experiencing the injustices, many of which we benefit from.

Because what if we actually listened to the voices of native people on whose land this church is built, on whose land our homes are built? What if we heard their voices and learned their stories and even asked questions about what should be returned to them...questions about how our success has come at a great cost to them?

What if we actually listened to the voices of those enslaved to racism in our country, those whose skin color makes a simple walk down the street more dangerous, whose cultural heritage has afforded them a richness of history but a dearth of security?

What if we actually listened to the voices of those enslaved in poverty, those who already know what it is to lose while the rich around them continue to gain, those who are often working harder and longer than the rest of us while just trying to figure out how to feed their children or keep a roof over their heads?

What if we listened to their voices even when the answers of our hearts told us that solutions might come in the form of our giving something up for the good of our neighbor?

In another meditation by Cameron Trimble, one where she reflects on the situation in Gaza, she writes, “In the midst of this, I find myself remembering a greeting used by the Maasai people of Kenya. When they meet one another, they ask [a question that] means, *‘And the children, are they well?’* The expected answer is, *‘All the children are well.’* It’s not a casual greeting. It’s a way of taking moral inventory. **If the children are well, the community is well. If the children are not well, something is deeply wrong....**

“There’s an African proverb that says, *‘The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.’* This is not just about one war or one country. It’s about the risk we run when children around the world grow up believing that violence is normal, that compassion is rare, and that their suffering is unseen. We are shaping the moral imagination of the next generation right now—through what we say and what we don’t, through what we choose to witness and what we choose to ignore.

Trimble goes on writing, “This is not about taking political sides. This is about taking spiritual responsibility. We are called—deeply and unmistakably—to care for children. Not just the children who look like us, live near us, or speak our language. *All* children. Palestinian children. Israeli children. Sudanese children. Ukrainian children. Children in detention centers. Children in our own cities and neighborhoods” (Cameron Trimble, “And the Children, Are They Well?”, May 20, 2025, Piloting Faith: An (Almost) Daily Meditation, <https://www.pilotingfaith.org/p/and-the-children-are-they-well>).

Perhaps it is in the faces of children where we can muster up the courage to be honest about the ways that we have put profits over people, productivity over humanity, our own security over that of our neighbors.

Perhaps we can be brave enough to choose another way...to acknowledge that it is our responsibility to pay attention to people...to notice and to work for their well being...to even be willing to sacrifice things that we value for the good of the other. Our lives and the lives of the children depend on it. Amen.