On the Wings of a Wild Goose

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Zoom recording of Kathy’s teaching is [here](https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/_utZrz3yrKlkyFaxqVsp4cWoT1SxERMFS3SkMymCvqGkhN4HaPLlmZl4KavSvLp1.yfwqLYdSlngzCwdt?startTime=1653832988000).

I stand before you this morning after yet another horrific mass shooting Like many of you, I feel numb and at a loss for words as yet another sadly predictable and preventable event shatters the lives of more families who will never be the same. There are many things that we can and should be doing to end the on-going carnage and create true safety for everyone. In her book *Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women and Queer Christians are reclaiming Evangelism,* author Deborah Jian Lee quotes Andrea Smith, indigenous feminist, author and activist, as saying “I think idolatry is when we only presume failure. We don’t believe God can actually work through us to create a whole different church or a whole different world.”

 If you haven’t had a chance to read it yet, I commend to you the article by Jim Wallis that Dixcy circulated Friday on the Eighth Day List serve which focuses on concrete steps we can take to move the needle on the passage of desperately needed gun reform.

In a month full of sadness and despair, coming on the heels of months and years in which the powers of death so often seem to have the upper hand, I have found a little refuge of hope in the Acts class that Sito has been leading. Sito did a wonderful job of purposefully reaching out to a number of communities to ensure a variety of perspectives and voices in the class. But having different voices doesn’t necessarily mean that those voice will be heard, and one of the gifts of the class has been the willingness of people to hold each other accountable to listening with an open heart and mind.

The class has also reacquainted me with the power and possibility of the Holy Spirit. While the book of Acts is officially known as the “Acts of the Apostles,” a better title would be the “Acts of the Apostles through the Power of the Holy Spirit,” for without the presence of the Holy Spirit, there would have been no church.

Growing up in the Presbyterian Church, talk of the Holy Spirit was basically relegated to Pentecost, the so called “Birthday of the Church,” which we celebrated with sheet cake and punch. The Holy Spirit was also sometimes referred to as the Holy Ghost, which tended to confuse matters even further. And so the Holy Spirit remained somewhat of an enigma to me, a distant third in the Holy Trinity behind God and Jesus. In hindsight, it seems rather fitting the Presbyterian Church, along with other mainline Protestant denominations would be a little leery of putting too much emphasis on the Holy Spirit, for while you could put God in a box, as it were — old man with long beard in the sky — and relegate Jesus to the role of gentle and meek shepherd, it’s a little more difficult to tame the Spirit, a life-giving and creative force that appears throughout the Bible, in many forms and guises, from rushing wind, to burning bushes, not to mention the Holy Spirit’s connection to Lady Wisdom who appears in the book of Proverbs as a feminine manifestation of God.

As John 3:8 puts it, “The wind blows where it pleases. You do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it I with everyone born of the Spirit.”

In the Roman Church the symbol of the Holy Spirit was the Dove, a peaceful, gentle bird, not particularly known as a troublemaker. But in the Celtic Christian tradition, the symbol of the Holy Spirit is the wild goose, as Catholic blogger, Kathy Schiffer, puts it in a recent article in the *National Catholic Register*, “..a wild goose will attack if it feels threatened. It’s wild and untamed. In the same way, the Celtic believers in the British Isles believed that the Holy Spirit is unpredictable, upsetting the status quo and leading people toward a new adventure with God.”

Wild geese are not solitary birds. They travel in groups, and their V-shaped flights patterns are designed to enable stronger birds to help their weaker compatriots by allowing them to fly in their tailwinds. Nor are they quiet birds: doves coo, but geese honk and can create quite a racket.

The Holy Spirit we encounter in the Book of Acts is definitely giving off more a wild-goose than a gentle-dove vibe, as time and again the Spirit breaks open, sometimes in very loud and disruptive ways, the Apostles’ understanding of just how generous and loving God really is, and just how radically God’s project undermines the Roman status quo.

In this week’s passage from Acts, we see the Holy Spirit putting on quite a show. Paul, in freeing an enslaved girl from the demonic spirit that has captured her voice, renders her of no value to her owners, who have, in the ways of all slaveowners, been making money off her body and labor. And given the fact that there were multiple owners, it appears that she was generating a sizable amount of income. When she can no longer perform for paying customers, her owners turn their wrath on Paul and Silas, dragging them before the authorities, demanding that they be thrown in jail. But it appears that simply being deprived of the young woman’s income generating abilities is not reason enough to get Paul and Silas arrested. So they up the ante, accusing Paul and Silas of “disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating for customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.” Now, the owners have the magistrates’ attention, and Paul and Silas are brutally beaten and hauled off to jail. But simply jailing them is not enough, the two men are perceived as such a threat, that the jailer puts them into the innermost cell, fastening their feet into stocks.

But while their bodies have been grievously wounded, their spirits have not been broken, and Paul and Silas spend the evening praying and singing, gathering strength from one another, and bringing comfort to their fellow prisoners. Suddenly, around midnight, an angry wild goose crashes the scene. There is an earthquake so violent that the very foundations of the prison are shaken and all of the cell doors spring open and everyone’s chains are unfastened.

And here’s where it gets really interesting. The terrified jailor, assuming that the prisoners have fled, draws his sword to kill himself. But Paul cries out “Do not harm yourself, we are all here.” Why didn’t they just all flee? Had Paul said something to his fellow prisoners to convince them to stay? Afterall, he says “we are all here,” not just “Silas and I are still here.” It seems as if he has become a spokesperson for the group, as if there was some type of a community that had formed during those hours of singing and prayers. We don’t really know from the text what happened to the other prisoners, we only know how the jailor and Paul and Silas’ stories end, but we are left to wonder how the other prisoner’s lives might have been transformed that night. But this is not just a story about how individuals’ lives are transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit, it is also about how systems of injustice are transformed.

The commentary on Acts that we have been using is by Willie James Jennings, associate professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School and an ordained Baptist minister. It is a wonderfully creative, challenging and prophetic reading of the Book of Acts. In reflecting on Acts 16: 24-40, Jennings writes:

For those of us in the prison-drenched West conditioned to believe our safety is directly tied to bodies locked behind doors, and prisoners chained, the sheer idea of prison doors wide open and chains loosened strike many people with stark terror. In this regard, we have become one with the jailor, one whose sense of well-being is shattered if people are set free. We are yet to see this God-given earthquake as the desire of God marked by this moment. The prison guard moves to the center of the story now, and with good reason. The moment of jail-breaking will also be his salvation.

Jennings continues:

The jailer sits in darkness and fear. We don’t know if he fears death at the hands of escaped prisoners or because he will be punished by the magistrates for allowing the prisoners to escape. Paul’s words to him separate light from darkness, and clarify for this man charged with maintaining the imprisonment of others a way out of death. “His question, What must I do to be saved, we have heard before in Acts, but now it is asked from the site of the prison and the position of the guard, and from that unique space, salvation comes to his household. This deliverance of the captives must include the jailer because redemption must come to him if the prisoners are to be free. Those who are aligned to the technology of the prison must be shown the new order of life in the Spirt if they would imagine life beyond cell and chain.

Thus, the work of the Holy Spirit is about liberating both jailed and jailor, both oppressed and oppressor, for only in that way can God’s vision for humanity, a beloved Kindom in which everyone is treated with equal dignity and respect, truly come to fruition.

In the 1970’s, an Aboriginal activist group in Queensland, Australia came up with the oft repeated quote: “If you have come here to help me you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” But however often the quote might have been repeated in progressive circles over the years, we, and by we, I mean me and my fellow White Christians, have yet to truly take it into our hearts and minds. To understand that work of anti-racism is not just about building a more equitable community for our BIPOC brothers and sisters, it’s about liberating ourselves from the racist chains that continue to bind our hearts and minds, both on a conscious and unconscious levels.

Each week, Sito has asked a guest speaker to prepare a reflection on that week’s Act’s passage. This week’s guest speaker was Rev Dr Anthony Everett, the executive director of [Mission Behind Bars & Beyond](https://www.missionbehindbarsandbeyond.org/index.html), a faith-based group that works with returning citizens in Kentucky. The group is not only focused on restorative justice, but also on transformational justice. The organization helps to restore the lives of individuals who have been both harmed and have caused harm, as well as working to transform a carceral system that is rooted in White supremacy and the control of black bodies.

Dr Everett said that what BIPOC folks need is not better White allies; what they need are co-conspirators who are willing to make themselves uncomfortable and risk getting themselves into trouble as they stand alongside their brothers and sisters of color in confronting the powers that continue to relegate anyone who is not White to second-class status. I also recognize the intersectionality of this work, and that we all have multiple identities. I’m White, but I’m also a woman, so in some circles that makes that makes me a second-class citizen. Unfortunately, too often movements for justice have not had the transformational power they might have otherwise had because they have been too narrow in focus, forgetting that we are all, at the end of the day, in this together.

Now, let’s return for a moment to see what happens after the jailer’s life-changing experience. After accepting Jesus as Lord, he tends to Paul and Silas’s wounds and then invites them to his home, where his entire household is baptized and where they all share a meal together. After spending the night in the jailer’s home, Paul and Silas awaken the next morning to word that the magistrate has ordered that they be allowed to go. You can imagine the jailer thinking Great! All’s well that ends well. However, Paul, Silas and the Holy Spirit have other plans.

Paul insists that he will not simply slink off in secret, the violations of his rights as a Roman citizen unchallenged. Instead, he insists that the authorities come and take him and Silas from the jail themselves, in public recognition that they had been in error. At this point, I can image that the jailer is getting a little nervous, afraid that Paul may be pushing the envelope a bit too far. But they end up back at the prison, and I’m assuming that the jailer probably was the one to take them back. Paul gets the public apology he has demanded, and he and Silas go on their way.

How many of us, if we had been the jailor, would have said to Paul and Silas, you know what, I think we’ll say goodbye now, and not walked back to the jail with them. Until then, much of his interaction with Paul and Silas had been in private, under cover of darkness. Now, he would be walking back with them in broad daylight, sealing his connection with these troublemakers. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he had second thoughts.

To be an ally means to be supporting someone else in their fight. If you decide for whatever reason, that being an ally is costing more than you are willing to pay, in time or treasure, then you can always fall back. But the person by whose side you have been walking, must continue on, only this time alone. As co-conspirators, you both are equally invested in the struggle. To be an ally means having an exit strategy, being co-conspirator means you have thrown in your lot with someone else, and there is no turning back.

I for one, am much more comfortable with the notion of being an ally, then a co-conspirator. But as long as I remain an ally and not a co-conspirator, the fight for equity and justice remains fundamentally their fight, not mine. But I’m also reminded that the work of building the peaceable Kindom, where all stand in right relationship to God, to one-another and to the natural world, is not a solo enterprise. We can only do this work as part of a community, we can only dare think about the possibility of moving from allyship to co-conspiratorship with the help of the Holy Spirit, in the context of community.

I have no idea what this would actually look like within the context of the Eighth Day Faith Community, but I think in part it means being open to new ideas and voices that are calling us to expand our circle of love, allowing people to come as their full selves, and incorporating the gifts and talents that they bring into the building of our little slice of the beloved Kindom. It means thinking creatively about the places and spaces we might show up to challenge the death-dealing principalities and powers.

It also means being attentive to the small moments, to the times when someone is truly heard and valued or when the fear underneath the anger is revealed and truly healing can begin. Further, it means appreciating that God can use anyone and everyone to further God’s good plan for a truly peaceable Kindom and that no one is beyond redemption.

In her ground-breaking book, *The Sum of Us*, economist Heather McGee explains what racism has cost everyone and how we can all prosper together. One of the lies that White supremacy tells us is that equality is a zero-sum game; that more rights and economic opportunities for Black people mean less rights and economic opportunities for White people. When in fact, the exact opposite is true. From the foundation of this country, White monied elites labored to keep poor and working-class Black and White people separated, by feeding White people a lie about their alleged racial superiority, keeping them from making common economic cause together. That lie continues to this day.

So, perhaps it begins by telling ourselves a new story, a story written on the wings of a wild goose who doesn’t care one whit about the status quo or about what people in power think possible, but whose only concern is creating the beloved community, in which all are equally cherished, and who doesn’t mind making a bit of a fuss along the way.