

Leitourgia

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 29, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Acts 16:16-39](#)

Copyright © 2022 by Jeffrey S. Spencer

If you're observant, you will notice that there's a difference between the sermon title and the graphic for today's worship service. There are two different spellings of *leitourgia* – one with an "o" and one without. That's because Pastor Brenda and I, when we planned this sermon series, wanted all five words we used to be transliterations of the Greek. As the church first became established, Greek was the most common language used, so the five original vocations of the church were expressed in Greek. We found two spellings of *leitourgia*, depending on the resource. I prefer the spelling with the "o."

Even if you were here for every one of the four previous sermons in this series, a quick review is probably in order. In "*Kerygma*," I talked about how we have good news to share and suggested that we figure out how to share it. In "*Diakonia*," Pastor Brenda reminded us of the historic healing ministry of the church and how that ministry continues (without all the miracles). In "*Didache*," Pastor Brenda reminded us that the historic ministry of teaching people about God's love and hopeful vision for a new world continues. In "*Koinonia*," I suggested that the world still needs the stratification-breaking power of Christian fellowship and community. Today, we turn to the fifth of the five original vocations of the church: *leitourgia*.

This may be the most recognizable of the five vocations because there is an English word that we use in the church (and sometimes beyond the church) that sounds almost the same: liturgy. Most people hear the word "liturgy" and think of the pomp and circumstance of formal worship services. Some churches are described as "liturgical," meaning that they put a lot of emphasis on the smells and bells of a worship service or that their denomination provides a prescribed order of worship, down to the words that are said. In the USA, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and sometimes Lutheran churches are thought of as "liturgical." The reality is that just about every congregation has their worship ritual habits and to that extent they, too, are liturgical. Our congregation is, to some extent, liturgical.

Interestingly, however, the literal meaning of the word *leitourgia* is "work of the people." The word comes from two other words, *leitos* and *ergos*. *Leitos* means "public" and *ergos* means "work," so, the "work of the people" of *leitourgia* is public service.

Somewhere along the line, the church narrowed down its understanding of the work of the people to the special work we do in our worship services. I have certainly been guilty of that. And then the events of the past two weeks happened in the context of we contemplating this story from the Book of Acts. And I found myself wondering, as Tripp Hudgins put it, "Why do we set the two practices – what we do in worship and what we do

after – at odds with one another?”¹ I have become more convinced than ever that both practices need to be seen as liturgy, as the ways we fulfill the vocation of *leitourgia*.

In two wonderful, simple paragraphs, Walter Brueggemann summarizes what happens in today’s reading and how it juxtaposes “a greedy, self-deceiving, status-quo society”² and the way of Jesus. “There is a used slave-girl fortune-teller who thinks that the future is all fated and can be programmed in a way of certitude. There are money-making exploiters, the banker-pimps who use the innocent fortune-teller to generate private wealth. There are the magistrates who use their authority to maintain the status quo and prevent any social ‘disturbance.’ And there’s a prison that is a social statement about power and order that constitutes a threat to any who act ‘outside the box.’

“Into the midst of these ‘fixtures’ of a stable society come the apostles who assert an alternative ‘way of salvation’ (verse 17). The new way of well-being exposes all their old ways as failed frauds. In reaction to such news, the magistrates by decree and the mob by violence try to stop the news of ‘another way.’ But, we are told, ‘suddenly’ all the fixtures of shut-down control are shattered. The text makes no direct connection between *the news* and *the quake*. It only lets us imagine that God’s new power is on the move. It’s no wonder that the ones who know, sing and pray and praise and praise (Psalm 97). We praise because we know the prison houses of fear cannot contain this God who gives ‘life and breath and all things’ (Acts 17:25).”³

Would you? Would you be one of the ones who knows and so you would sing and pray and praise? It’s not as if themes of this story have changed all that much. Our criminal injustice system still runs very much by the gold-rule. Not the golden rule, but the gold-rule – as in, the ones with the gold rule. Paul and Silas might have been charged with promoting Jewish practices (which were, apparently, illegal for Roman citizens in Philippi to follow),⁴ but they got in trouble because they were messing with commerce. And if the idea of Paul, a Roman citizen, being thrown in jail seems like something strange from millennia ago, just do a quick google search for news stories about U.S. citizens being detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.⁵

Jason Byassee points out that there is a swinging back and forth between the powers of oppression and the powers of freedom in the story. “The story in Acts 16 starts with despair: slavery and demon possession. Liberation interrupts as a girl is healed, but then evil returns (as it is wont to do). Mob violence, trumped up charges, torture, jail. Grace

¹ Tripp Hudgins, “Liturgy and Mission: Why Rachel Held Evans and Keith Anderson Are Right,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/articles/liturgy-and-mission-why-rachel-held-evans-and-keith-anderson-are-right> (accessed 22 May 2022).

² Walter Brueggemann, “Social Disturbance,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/social-disturbance> (accessed 22 May 2022).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Jim Rice, “Jail Ministry,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/jail-ministry> (accessed 22 May 2022).

⁵ See, for instance, <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/u-s-citizen-who-says-he-was-held-in-ice-custody-for-more-than-a-month-wants-accountability/2780842/>; <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/marine-veteran-us-citizens-detained-ice-aclu/story?id=67465583>; and <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/25/745417268/u-s-citizen-detained-for-weeks-nearly-deported-by-immigration-officials>.

interrupts again with an earthquake; barred doors fly open, O freedom! Evil returns again with a move toward suicide. Then grace triumphs: salvation for a household, baptism, a meal together, the end.”⁶

In fact, as Cindy Sojourner pointed out during last week’s Monday Morning Bible Study, the scene in the jailer’s home is a communion scene. It is a reenacting of the last supper. The jailer washes Paul and Silas’ wounds – which I imagine to be both the wounds from the beatings and the wounds from the stocks around their ankles. In other words, the jailer washes their feet. And then he eats with them. He shares a meal. They break bread together.

So, as I reflected on this story of the past week, I realized that in the story, the liturgy of the church is taken into the streets three times. First, Paul and Silas proclaimed, as the enslaved woman put it, “a way of salvation” to all who would listen. Then, imprisoned, they sing and pray together. And finally, they celebrate a communion of sorts with the jailer and his family.

And looking back at this vocation of *leitourgia*, I wonder how we can take liturgy to the streets as we step forward into this changed and changing world. And then, on Tuesday, word came of yet another mass shooting. This one was in a school. In this one, 19 children and two teachers were killed. And I realized that this is certainly one place where we must bring the liberating liturgy of the church into the streets.

And I realized that this is certainly one place where we must bring the liturgy of the streets into the church.

The second mass shooting and killing in fewer than a dozen days. The early one took place on Saturday, May 14, in Buffalo, New York. We mustn’t forget Celestine Chaney, Roberta Drury, Andre Mackniel, Katherine Massey, Margus Morrison, Heyward Patterson, Aaron Salter, Geraldine Talley, Ruth Whitfield, and Pearl Young.⁷ Each of them was a beloved child of God. Each of them was killed by gun violence and racist hatred. Each of them should have been able to go to the grocery store safely.

And likewise, each of the children and the two teachers killed in Uvalde, Texas, must not be forgotten. I want to say each of their names out loud, even though I know I may mispronounce some of them. Jackie Cazares and Eliahna “Ellie” Garcia, who were 9; Nevaeh Alyssa Bravo, Makenna Lee Elrod, Jose Flores, Uziyah Garcia, Amerie Jo Garza, Xavier Lopez, Jayce Carmelo Luevanos, Tess Marie Mata, Alithia Haven Ramirez, Annabelle Rodriguez, Alexandria Aniyah Rubio, Layla Salazar, Jailah Silguero, Eliahana Torres and Rojelio Torres, who were 10; and Maranda Gail Mathis, 11. The teachers were Irma Garcia, 48, and Eva Mireles, 44.⁸

⁶ Jason Byassee, “Freedom Wins,” *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/freedom-wins> (accessed 22 May 2022).

⁷ Adrienne Vogt, et al, “The latest on the Buffalo supermarket mass shooting,” *CNN*, https://www.cnn.com/us/live-news/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-05-17-22/h_dde5248154ded799d66474e30153f594 (posted 17 May 2022; accessed 28 May 2022).

⁸ “What we know about the victims of the Uvalde shooting,” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/article/uvalde-shooting-victims.html> (posted 25 May 2022; accessed 28 May 2022).

Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, and locked in stocks in the inner most depths of the prison. And there, in the filth and smells and darkness, they started singing and praying. They found themselves, as the church in its earliest decades found itself, the object of anger, persecution, hatred, and fear. All those emotions once directed at Jesus, all those emotions that led to Jesus' execution, were now directed at Paul and Silas. It could have led to bitterness. It could have led to the seeking of revenge. But Paul and Silas knew how the story ends. Because they knew the power of the resurrection, they could turn from their own hatred and fear and invite the people around them into a life with God. Instead of responding to their jailer with revenge or violence, they invited him to know the God of life.⁹

Upon his return from the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights march with Dr. Martin Luther King, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked, "Did you find time to pray?" He answered, "I prayed with my feet."

"As Christians we must advocate for life in the midst of death, for justice in the midst of oppression, and [for] peace in the midst of hatred."¹⁰ Our liturgy, our public work, must not be limited to the confines of our sanctuary. It must go into the street. And in doing so, our very lives will become a prayer and we will offer God our praise in our living.

Amen.

⁹ Michaela Bruzzese, "From Death to Life," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/death-life-0> (accessed 22 May 2022).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*