

At the 10:30 am service on May 16, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on Acts 16:16-40.

“Mack Truck Missionaries and Consequences”

The Apostle Paul in the biblical reading today and Dorothy Stang, a gentle looking Roman Catholic nun in Brazil have one thing in common: They are Mack truck missionaries.

Dorothy’s brother, David Stang, gave Dorothy the title. In speaking about her tremendous missionary work in Brazil he told The New York Times: “She was not by any means a sweetly pious nun who had retreated to a life of prayer and contemplation. She was tough and smart. It was precisely her fervent earthly work on behalf of the poor that got her killed. None of this ooey-gooey little nun bit. She was like a Mack truck.”

Sister Dorothy grew up in Dayton, Ohio, and became a naturalized Brazilian citizen. She was a rain forest activist and was killed at the age of 73 after she fought to preserve a piece of jungle that ranchers wanted to clear for logging and cattle ranching. She had spent 30 years fighting the destruction of the Amazon, and was viewed as a leader in the movement for sustainable development there.

Early one morning in 2005 she was walking in a remote countryside and was intercepted by two armed men. When asked if she was carrying a gun she pulled a Bible from her bag and said “This is the only weapon I have.” She read from the Beatitudes and after reading “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God,” one of the gunmen shot her six times.

In our biblical text today Paul had a similar mission experience. He was attacked and beaten (although he wasn’t killed) after he confronted a person, or spirit, that bugged him for days. The biblical text tells the story:

“One day, as we (Luke, Paul and company) were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, ‘These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.’ She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, ‘I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.’ And it came out that very hour.”

Paul and his band are harassed by a spirit they regard as evil. It’s a jealous spirit. Paul discerns the oppressive nature of the relationship between the slave girl and her exploitive owners. He tolerates this harassing spirit for many days and finally loses his cool and confronts the spirit and orders it in the name of a more powerful spirit, that of Jesus Christ, to depart from the girl. The spirit departs and leaves the owners without a source of wealth, in other words, with less wealth. This sounds much like the work of Sister Dorothy.

Paul and Dorothy hit their adversaries head on. In both cases a Mack truck was needed to challenge the powers of unjust financial gain. Just as the wealthy ranchers and loggers

were threatened by Dorothy's mission so the owners of the slave-girl are threatened by Paul's mission. The biblical text states it best:

"But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks."

Fortunately, Paul was not killed for his efforts but he was stopped. Even Mack trucks can be stopped. But not for long as the stories continue in a third and similar way. Appeals are made to the law of the land for human rights and justice. In Dorothy's case it came after her death and in Paul's case it is done the next day.

Roman law which influenced much of European and US Common Law goes back to the days of Paul and further back. As noted last week Paul was in the city of Philippi, a leading city of the district and a Roman Colony. As a Roman citizen he appeals his case. Again, the text states it best:

"When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, 'Let those men go.' And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, 'The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace. But Paul replied, 'They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.' The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them."

I like this sense of appeal to the rights of citizenship and the law. It is wonderful to have a legal system to which citizens can appeal. That's what makes our legal system and much of the world so good. The US Constitution and amendments have established a just system in our country and when we experience an injustice we can appeal to this law and challenge and change the law if we feel it needs to be more just.

The significance of good governance and law in a democracy was neatly summarized this week by Elena Kagan when she accepted her nomination to the Supreme Court. She said: "The (Supreme) Court is an extraordinary institution in the work it does and in the work it can do for the American people by advancing the tenets of our Constitution, by upholding the rule of law, and by enabling all Americans, regardless of their background or their beliefs, to get a fair hearing and an equal chance at justice...law matters; because it keeps us safe; because it protects our most fundamental rights and freedoms; and because it is the foundation of our democracy."

In asserting his legal rights as a Roman citizen, Paul provides a wonderful pattern for every citizen in a democracy and for people of faith.

The Dorothy Stang story is a case in point and equally powerful in its response to her horrendous killing. Her case attracted international attention from church and human rights groups and cast scrutiny on Brazil's justice system, which has been plagued by corruption.

After a series of trials, acquittals and retrials, a jury in Belem found Vitalmiro Bastos de Moura guilty last month of ordering Sister Dorothy's death because she blocked him from taking land the government gave to farmers. Moura, a rancher who had previously been acquitted of orchestrating her murder, was sentenced to 30 years.

Also in April, a jury convicted the Brazilian rancher Regivaldo Galvão of orchestrating the murder of the nun. Galvão, the last of five defendants to stand trial in the case, was sentenced to 30 years in prison. The judges also voted to retry Rayfran das Neves Sales, who had confessed to pulling the trigger. He was found guilty and sentenced to 28 years.

There we have it: Mack truck missionaries and the consequences of their actions. I'm not sure how God is calling us to respond to this message. I'll leave it to the spirit and you. It's almost humorous to consider that God might be calling someone to be a Mack truck missionary. For now, I'll stick to my Toyota Corolla. Amen.