

Truth and consequences

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My dad and I fought constantly when I was a teenager. In my adolescent mind, every boundary set by my parents was evidence that they did not trust me or see me as the adult I obviously was. From my dad I inherited the need to always be right, thus ensuring regular escalations of arguments into legendary yelling matches. On two occasions I was so caught up in the fight that I swore at him loudly and then, realizing that I had jumped over the line, turned and ran. I had no reason to be afraid of him; I simply wasn't ready to face the consequences of my words. So I ran.

While I had not yet heard the phrase “speaking truth to power,” this is exactly what I thought I was doing: I was crying out against injustices. But I didn't stick around to face the consequences. This week's reading from Acts speaks of other people's responses when presented with capital “T” truth.

Paul's been followed around for days by a slave girl who's possessed by a spirit that describes Paul pretty accurately. He doesn't disagree with what she says, but the way in which she speaks this truth (too loud? Too public, too close in his ear?) annoys him. So he orders the spirit to leave her.

Confronted with the reality of Paul's power, the girl's owners are angry. They've lost a huge income source. Paul and Silas are thrown in jail, where they sing hymns and pray until God's power over nature and unjust imprisonment is revealed. The jailer, unprepared to face the consequences of an empty prison, prepares to commit suicide.

Here's where we see God's way of revealing truth and facing consequences. When Paul and Silas are accused, they go to prison, but when offered their freedom they stay instead of fleeing. Apparently when God's power is revealed—over and against the power of businessmen to exploit a young girl, over and against Rome's power to imprison agitators and evangelists—there are consequences. Doors break open. Yet the apostles stay put. Instead of an untimely death, there's a surprising baptism.

In our distinction between prophet and pastor, we tend to think of the pastor as sometimes reticent to speak the truth for fear of upsetting others—imperial authorities, local businessmen, slave owners or big givers. Meanwhile, the prophet speaks the truth readily, without acknowledging the life-changing (even life-threatening) consequences that may follow.

Each stereotype misses the compelling gospel witness of Paul and Silas. Paul only speaks the truth about the girl's demon when the spirit (Spirit?) nags him; when he does, he is fully aware of the possible consequences and willing to face them.

The gospel empowers those who proclaim its truth to withstand the aftershocks. Paul takes his flogging. Civil-rights marchers are beaten and more by police. Pastors lose members when they take stands or break rules. Jesus speaks the truth all the way to the cross. The gospel's truth and consequences are inextricably linked; the good news will be spread only if we do not turn and run.