

Prior to coming to York, I lived in New Canaan, Connecticut. New Canaan is on the New York border. It's not all that far from New York City. In fact, many New Canaanites commute to the city for work. You can hop on the commuter train in the center of town and arrive at Grand Central Terminal in just over an hour.

Just up the road from New Canaan is Newtown, Connecticut. I recall having a conversation with one of the church members one day. I was asking about the impact 9/11 had on the residents of New Canaan. He described how devastating it was for that community in such close proximity to New York. But then he said this. He said, "But, honestly, I think the shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School hit us harder."

There were numerous shootings around the country prior to Newtown in 2012, but that one seemed different. That was an elementary school in which 26 children and adults lost their lives. I recall people hoping out loud, "Maybe this shooting will be the catalyst for change. Maybe this one will cause the nation to rise up and address the violence in our society."

Of course, not much changed after Sandy Hook. There have been 27 school shootings, just this year, and we're only in May. That's just the school shootings. That doesn't count the recent attack at a grocery store in Buffalo by a white supremacist. That doesn't count the shootings that have taken place in churches and synagogues in recent years.

It's almost as if, as a nation, we're being held captive. The violence is so pervasive. There are video games, the goal of which is to kill as many people as possible. Action movies play into the what has been called the "myth of redemptive violence." That's the idea that only violence can save us from violence. Professional sporting events often break out into fights. The message to youngsters watching is if you want to win, use violence. If you have a problem, solve it with violence.

My spiritual hero, Thomas Merton, once suggested that our busyness is perhaps the most prevalent form of contemporary violence. Being carried away by too many activities and causes undermines the inner peace necessary to change the world for the better.

It feels to me that we're in the grip of some powerful forces. The fact that it's predominantly white males carrying out these shootings is an indication that toxic masculinity and racism are two of the powerful forces holding us captive. I find myself skeptical that we have the ability or the collective will to solve this problem.

This week another shooting at an elementary school is a tragic reminder we are still captive. It feels to me like a tsunami of violence. How do you stop a tidal wave? It's not just that we don't understand the solution. What do we do when we don't even understand the problem? That's what I'm asking in the wake of the shooting in Texas.

Then, suddenly, in the depths of my anger, disgust, and discouragement the lectionary provides this odd little story about a slave, set free from her captivity. Shortly after arriving in the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas attract the attention of a demon-possessed slave girl.

Not only was she held captive by a spirit, she was enslaved and exploited by men who were willing to profit financially from her condition. She provided them a good deal of money by telling fortunes. As a result of this spirit, she begins to follow Paul and Silas around Philippi crying out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation."

Day after day this went on until, finally, Paul got fed up. See, Paul realized a few things. That girl had a spirit within her, but Paul had a spirit within him as well. Paul was convinced the spirit that dwelled within him, the Spirit of God, was more powerful than the spirit that dwelled within her.

Paul was a disciple of Jesus Christ who spent his life freeing people from one kind of captivity or another. Reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus once said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..."

The followers of Jesus were empowered by the Holy Spirit to cast out demons, to heal people of their afflictions, to restore people to their place in society. In fact, Paul personally experienced the transforming power of God. He operated under the conviction that his God was a God who saves the lost.

The God Paul served, did not tolerate the weak being exploited by the strong. The God Paul served was a God of liberation. Paul lived his life in the shadow of the resurrection of Jesus. The Roman Empire and its vast army could not control Jesus. A tomb could not hold him. Even death itself could not hold Jesus its captive.

When Paul could no longer tolerate what that malicious spirit was doing in that slave girl, he took action. With surety of God's triumph over evil, Paul turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And the spirit left her that very hour.

Now, I know this is a Bible story about one young girl, but it helps me to see the problems of our world in a different light. It gives me hope. Paul believed in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul believed God saves the lost. Paul believed God triumphs over evil. That belief, that conviction, led to an act of liberation.

That's the message I take from the story: believe. Believe that, as a nation, we can curb the violence. If you're someone thinking belief is not what we need right now, and what we really need is action, I understand. However, it is belief there is a solution, and belief there truly is a power greater than the one that holds us captive, that makes action possible.

This story gives me hope, because it tells me we are not alone in our struggles. In one of his books, author Robert Schuller shares a story about Mother Teresa. He wrote: *Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a dream. She told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage."*

*"Mother Teresa," her superiors chided gently, "you cannot build an orphanage with three pennies. With three pennies, you can't do anything."*

*"I know," she said, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything!"*

Honestly, I am not convinced that, we, as a nation, have the ability or the will to do what it takes to stem the problem of violence. But I believe it's God's desire. I believe God can find a way. I believe God has the power. I believe we can do it...with the help of God.

There was a consequence of the girl being freed from her demon. She was no longer a source of income for her owners. They could no longer exploit her vulnerability and disorder. They didn't understand that Paul's God, the Most High God, has a heart for the weak and the vulnerable. They didn't understand that God desires freedom for those in captivity. Someone once said, "It's hard for a man to understand when his livelihood

depends on him not understanding.” Using trumped up charges, they had Paul and Silas thrown in jail.

At about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God while the other prisoners listened. Can you imagine? Why sing hymns at midnight, while your feet are in shackles? Could it be their belief in a God who could save them, a God whose power was greater than any chains, and a belief in a freedom that no one could take away?

This being Memorial Day weekend, we honor those who died in war defending the freedoms we enjoy: freedom of speech, freedom to assemble, freedom of the press. On Memorial Day, we recall that freedoms need to be defended. But there is one God-given freedom that can never be taken away. That’s the freedom to choose how we respond to any situation.

Paul and Silas were victims, but they did not take on a victim mentality. They sang as they waited for the Lord. Suddenly, there was an earthquake. It shook the foundations of the prison. All the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. God freed them from bondage.

When the jailer arrived the next morning, he saw the doors open. Assuming all the prisoners escaped, he was about to kill himself with a sword. Ironically, he was about to resort to violence in order to escape shame and humiliation. In the nick of time, Paul shouted, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” The prisoners had no need to leave.

Seeing there was something different about Paul and Silas, seeing they had something he wanted, the jailer asked, “What must I do to be saved?” To which they answered, “Believe! Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your whole household.”

It all starts with belief. So, let’s get to work. Let’s take a hard look at ourselves. Let’s admit there’s a problem. As a nation, let’s make some tough decisions. Let’s make the protection of children and teachers a priority for our country.

Look at all the people in this story that were saved. The slave girl was saved from a demon. Paul and Silas were saved from jail. The jailer and his whole household were saved. You and I won’t be saved from the problem of violence by our own effort. But with God and our effort...

