

Seventh Sunday of Easter/June 2, 2019

Acts 16:16-34; John 17:20-26;

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"All One in Christ Jesus"

"He's a jerk!" "I don't like him - I never have!" Those are a couple of the comments from this past week's House Church meeting, regarding Paul in today's passage from the book of Acts. We were all intrigued by the character here of the slave-girl, who it says "*had a spirit of divination*" and some of our group had strong feelings about the way Paul treated her.

Paul and Silas and his group came upon her as they were again going to the place of prayer there in Philippi. This place of prayer is also where, earlier, they had met some women, including Lydia, the wealthy business woman who was a purveyor of purple cloth, who Kate wrote about last Sunday. Lydia would be converted to the Way by Paul's preaching, be baptized along with her whole household, and would invite Paul and his group to stay at her home. This is likely where the believers would gather as a church in Philippi, which by the way, was the first church organized on European soil and we know, from Paul's letter to the Philippians, that this would become a group of people that he would have great affection for.

So we have this developing story in the book of Acts, that tells us about how the early church expanded and began to include Gentiles, or non-Jewish people. We had heard how Peter had felt called to go to some Gentiles and baptized them and then later Paul would begin doing the same thing.

It was a big step for those first followers who were of course all Jewish, and there were many arguments and heated discussions about who should be allowed in and how that should be done. Should circumcision be required or dietary restrictions be enforced? But what we see happening throughout this whole story here in Acts, is a greater inclusion and broadening understanding of who is accepted and acceptable in God's sight and therefore into the social order of the church.

It is into this story that we meet this young slave-girl. Luke, the author of Acts, does not name her. The Greek words that describe her gift of divination, are *pneuma pythona*, literally, *a spirit, a snake*, and likely an allusion to the snake that symbolized the Greek god Apollo at Delphi, where young women divined the future. This young girl, for a sum of money, would tell the future of those who wanted to know what was going to happen to them or who had a concern about some issue or relationship. She was a slave, and so she likely did not benefit from her craft but was used by others for their own personal gain. We might think in our own day of girls and women who are marketed in human trafficking for prostitution or sweat labor.

Generally, Jews did not have an appreciation for such practitioners of divination. They were seen as superstitious and possessed. We might think of the exorcisms Jesus did, where evil spirits that had invaded people were commanded to leave them and they were considered healed from such demonic possession. Here Paul is seen as possessing such power.

And yet, Paul does not seem to call the spirit out in order to free the girl or to bring healing and wholeness to her life. Rather, we are told that he does this because he is "*annoyed*" with her. For many days she had been following them and calling out "*These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.*" We might understand how Paul could have been frustrated by a person who kept shouting out, while he was trying to share his message of Christ.

But we could also argue, as some did at House Church, that she was only speaking a truth that she knew. She indeed was declaring the truth that Paul and Silas were slaves of God, and that people could find salvation from their troubles through them. You would think that Paul would have found that a compliment, would have been thankful for her oracle about them.

Look however, at a similar story found in Luke's gospel, this one about the Gerasene demoniac. This is a man who lived among the tombs, naked, outcast from his community and filled with demons who called themselves "Legion." When Jesus confronts him, he cries out with a loud voice, "*What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beseech you, do not torment me.*" Sound familiar? Luke uses the same words from the mouth of the Gerasene man as from the slave-girl to identify the God of both Jesus and Paul. And both are expressing a truth. In that story, Jesus expells the demons and the man is freed and returned to his right mind.

But we are still faced with the question, of why was Paul so uncaring, so insensitive to the plight of this young girl? Why was he *annoyed* rather than compassionate. Why was he more concerned about his own message and not about what she had to convey? Why didn't he try to free her from her enslavement, the real enslavement to those men who were using her for profit? Why was Paul such a jerk? Perhaps we are meant to see the all too human side of this leader of the early church.

And then there is the question of why doesn't Luke tell us more about this girl? He clearly uses her as a strong contrast to the woman he previously told us about, Lydia. Lydia is a strong, accomplished, wealthy, adult woman, who is free, remarkably free in a social structure that favors men. The unnamed girl is young, helpless, poor, and enslaved, in a social structure that favors the rich and powerful. The only thing they have in common, is that they both are very good at what they do. But for the slave-girl, that does her no good, brings her no happiness, and in reality, though her divination powers are a gift, it is the reason for her captivity, her enslavement.

Paul would later write in his letter to the Galatians, words that seem to fly in the face of what he has done here. "*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*" (Gal. 3:27-28). It is hard to understand how the man who ignored the cruelty being done to a young slave-girl, and passed up an opportunity to free her and make a difference in her life, could say these words. Perhaps Paul learned and grew in spirit and wisdom over time. Perhaps he later regretted how he treated her. Perhaps, having lost her powers of divination, she was freed by her captors and ended up being converted by Paul to the Way and thereby was an inspiration for Paul.

In John's gospel, Jesus ends his long Farewell Discourse to his disciples the night before he dies, by praying for their unity. "*I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one.*" We can only fulfill Christ's prayer, can only be one, when we have love and respect, compassion and care for every one of us. Even those who annoy us, or who disturb us. Even those who make us feel uncomfortable or who are different. Even those who possess different gifts or ways of being. Even those who stand for the things we detest, who disagree with us, who harm us, or who persecute us. The only thing that will make us all one, is when we can gather around the table of love, the table of acceptance, the table of Christ, of our *Most High God*, who frees all of us from whatever enslaves us and makes room, makes a place at the table, for every single one of us. No exceptions. May all of us know and feel the freedom to come to this table, together. Amen.