

Acts 16:16-34 Mid-Week Reflection.

You know our Reading this morning from Acts is a pretty dramatic story. There's lots of action! It's got a mob scene, people getting beaten, thrown into prison, an earthquake, an attempted suicide. The only things missing are helicopters and car chases.

It happened in the ancient city of Philippi and involved the Apostle Paul, his companion Silas and some others. Now you would at first think that the outcome for the slave-girl was good – no more evil spirit controlling her. But what sounds like at least a partly happy outcome had unfortunate, even disastrous consequences for Paul and his companions. The slave owners, to whom this girl technically belonged, seeing that the Apostle Paul had somehow removed whatever it was about this girl that made her profitable, seize Paul and Silas, drag them into the marketplace and in front of the magistrates where they accuse Paul and Silas of disturbing the city and advocating customs that were not lawful. Things then go from bad to worse. The crowd begins to attack them. The magistrates have Paul and Silas stripped and beaten and thrown into prison. But as always Paul turns what seems like chaos into opportunity. Worship surrounds the prison walls, then an earthquake which is well timed and very precise opens the prison doors and undoes the chains of the prisoners. And so opportunity flourishes as we hear that the jailer is convicted in his soul and gives his life to Christ. In fact the whole family turn their lives around. So it's all good in the end. As I said, full of action and adventure!

And yet, this morning I don't want us to concentrate on all of that. There is one person for whom things may not have turned out so well, one person who gets forgotten in all the action. That person is the slave girl, the girl with the spirit of divination. The story kind of moves on without her. We hear nothing more of her. She has had a demon cast out of her and can no longer tell fortunes. But she is still a slave.

Who is she? We don't know much about her. The Bible describes her as being possessed by a demon, one that enabled her to tell fortunes. She had what was called a Pythian spirit. People would come to these people to ask them questions which they would answer while in a trance, speaking "in the spirit of the snake-god."

In that time period there was no treatment for people with this, no medications, no counseling, no effort to help such people cope in society. Mostly they were in the care of their families, if they had families, or they wandered the streets. The girl in the story is relegated to the side, to the shadows. Her story is not important, not even to the writer of the Book of Acts. She is a bit player in the drama involving two important Christian missionaries.

I have to admit that her story would not be one that sermons are made of. Most ministers or pastors would concentrate on the big story of the Jailer turning his life around, or the way in which Paul & Silas worship through adversity.

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But we need to consider that this slave-girl is a person, too, a person of value, a child of God, someone who needs and deserves the embrace of God's love and grace at least as much if not more than the jailor, or anyone else in the city of Philippi.

When you look at the story with the slave girl in mind, it becomes just a bit disturbing. This is not a story about one of the apostles reaching out to help someone in need, healing someone, or rescuing someone from a terrible plight. The text says that she followed them around for three days crying out about them being servants of the Most High God. And after three days, it says, Paul, who was "very much annoyed," turned to her and cast out the spirit.

Now it is possible, I suppose, to say that maybe Paul felt that she was becoming a hindrance, a deterrent to his mission. Maybe he was thinking about the overall goal of reaching others, and she was making that hard. But Church has to become a place where everyone feels welcome, even those who socially may not behave the way we expect they should in church. I know of a family where their daughter has Asbergers, and because she is uncomfortable and would shout if she is in confined places with lots of people, they chose as a family to simply not come to church in case people would be offended. Now I'm not saying I know the answer to this dilemma, but is it appropriate that people feel they can't attend church just in case they offend others?

Like Paul we are sometimes put to the test – after all it was Paul who wrote to the Corinthians about love being patient, and kind. And now, potentially, we see a situation where the doing of such words may be a challenge. So can we in today's churches find that balance of providing a safe and comfortable place for everyone while not rejecting those who are rejected by so many others? Fortunately I believe we have a church family that welcomes again and again and again. The Jailer's story in today's world would be an easy one to celebrate in the church. A man of position, well-respected in the community. He would be a great addition. But what about the slave girl? Would we find it in our hearts to make a place for her in our congregation? Would we be able to live up to our convictions and our rhetoric? That folks is a challenge for all of us, including me. Jesus in today's gospel reading prays to his Father in heaven that the new believers will be an effective witness of God's love to the world. Today, let's pray that God's Spirit will fill us afresh with a desire to welcome the stranger in, and that our faith will express itself in love. Let us pray.

Father God, may we be people who accept all whatever their circumstances. May we be effective witnesses of your love. As you love us, so we love others. Help us and equip us with wisdom to love those who we find it difficult to connect with. And may those who we welcome know your unconditional love for them. In Jesus name I pray, Amen.