

## **Breaking Chains**

Acts 16:16-34

May 16, 2010; Tim Devine

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The lectionary reading from last week was also from Acts. In that reading we heard of Lydia, the dealer of purple cloth, and a woman of considerable means who – along with her household – became the first European converts to Christianity.

Today's reading immediately continues upon that narrative. Paul and Silas and the entourage are still in the city of Philippi in the region of Macedonia, in present-day northern Greece. They continue to meet and worship and preach by the river where Lydia was baptized.

Kate Huey, on the United Church of Christ website, has this to say about this point in today's scripture reading:

*On his regular trips to the place of prayer, Paul kept encountering a woman who was very different from Lydia. While Lydia was a woman of position and many possessions, with her own household and a business to run, this other woman, really a young girl, was a person in the street, a slave-girl, a possession herself, owned not only by other humans but held captive by a spirit that appeared to give her special powers. Scholars describe such people as 'diviners' who were believed to be able to predict the future but also to see more deeply into realities the rest of us might miss; in the Greek culture, these powers were linked to the god Apollo, whose worship center at Delphi had a snake as his symbol.*

And, a point of my own, we go back to that Biblical habit of not even giving women in the story a name. Lydia had power, money, and offered hospitality. She is named. This young girl, who had none of these to share or offer, remains without a name.

This young nameless girl and her behavior may seem strange to us today, but in that time and place this was not unusual. It was customary to come to people like this girl seeking information and to ask them questions while they were in a trance. So this "*spirit of divination*" is somewhat different than the stories we have also heard in the Gospel accounts of people who were tormented by spirits and demons that were encountered (and often exorcized) by Jesus or his followers.

This is different. In fact, the girl is a lucrative small-business enterprise for the men who own her. Like so many young girls throughout history, she is used by those who have figured out a way to make money with her, but her strange public announcements about Paul and his little band of missionaries are certainly not bringing much income to her owners. The text states that she "*kept doing this for many days.*"

And then Paul gets “*very much annoyed.*” I think this might be my favorite line in the scripture passage. Paul, who so often can be annoying to others, gets annoyed. And, in a quick matter-of-fact exchange, the “*spirit of divination*” is released from this young girl.

There are two ways, and perhaps more, of reading the meaning. The first, articulated by Kate Huey, focuses on the annoyance factor. She writes:

*Paul is tired of being heckled by the spirit that possesses her and can recognize who he is, who his God is, and what he has to offer. He's focused on doing what he came to do, and healing slave-girls doesn't appear to be at the top of his agenda. Paul finds her distracting, ironically, even if she does proclaim the truth. Is she too loud, or too repetitious, or is it just too much for the truth to come from such a source? Interesting questions to consider, but in any case, Paul 'turns' and heals her, just to quiet her down.*

Another viewpoint is shared by Ron Hansen, in a reflection on this scripture passage in the May 4, 2010 issue of The Christian Century. He writes:

*Paul looks deeply into the girl's ravaged personality and recognizes an alien spirit that has overtaken her. Evil is seeking to ally itself with Christianity for its own corrupt purposes, either to discredit the faith or to hide behind it... Her well-being, for Paul, is far more important than the shamming grandeur of her false praise.*

I'm with Kate on this one. Right there in the text it says that he was “*annoyed.*” And not just a little, he was “*very much annoyed.*” I don't sense that Paul was concerned for her well being. What I do sense with the second commentary is a long-standing tradition of making “Christian nice” out of a situation that really isn't all that nice.

If Paul really did “look deeply in the girl's ravaged personality” then what about what happened – or didn't happen – next? What about the young girl's life afterward? Isn't she still a slave? So why isn't Paul moved to help her beyond freeing her from the spirit that possessed her? She recognized the truth, but unlike Lydia last week or the jailer this coming evening, the young slave girl is not invited into the faith community that Paul professes to share. She is still separated from the very God she names. And in another commentary – Feasting on the Word – Ronald Cole-Turner writes that Paul “*frees her from her possession, but does nothing to free her from being a possession.*”

A question for those who study the text is if Paul was captive to the prevailing culture of his time? About youth? About women? About slaves?

And, rather than just focus on Paul and feel self-righteous about that, what is the question in this story for us? What people do we dismiss who get in our way? Who annoys us? Who might get us off track with what we perceive to be our mission?

There are a lot of open questions here. But the story continues and leaves no open question about the anger of the owners of the young slave girl. They now act to ensure

that Paul (and Silas, too) pay for Paul's action. And in an all too familiar way, we see that they don't particularly want justice, they want revenge. Paul and Silas are brought to a seemingly rigged court scene, the crowds join in the attack, and they are stripped, beaten, and thrown into the darkest depth of the local jail.

Maybe being in jail is a better setting for being in touch with one's humility. For after the earthquake, when Paul and Silas could escape, they don't. Paul understands that the jailer will be in trouble, if not killed, if they escape. And as a result of that compassion another head of household and family (echoing Lydia) join into the new faith community.

Another author – Lawrence Farris – in The Lectionary Commentary observes that everyone in this story needs to be freed. The young girl certainly needs to be freed – both from the spirit of divination and from slavery. But in addition, the men who used and owned her (possessed by greed), the men who judged Paul (possessed by fear and a hunger for power or maybe for the public peace), the jailer (a victim in his own way), and, most surprisingly of all, Paul and Silas themselves, who need to be freed from their narrow way of thinking. The theme of breaking chains – literally in the prison earthquake – is figuratively a metaphor for every character in the story.

And as the story concludes it echoes something else – something earlier in the Biblical narrative – something even deeper. What do we think of when we hear or read about washing wounds, being baptized, and sharing a meal? Doesn't that sound familiar to us across all the centuries, and isn't it at the heart of who we are as followers of Jesus?

This simple story – with its poignancy and its promise – is still important in a world that needs to be breaking chains on every level and a world that is still hungry for good news. Amen.

## **Acts 16:16-34**

One day, as we 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. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace 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.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.