

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

Gentile Followers of Jesus

We've spent a lot of time since the Sunday after Easter in the Book of Acts. Next week we'll wrap it up, when we read the familiar story of the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost. This week I want to pick up where we left off last week. Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke have traveled to Macedonia, and Lydia, the well-to-do dealer of purple cloth of Thyatira has just been baptized – along with her whole family. This week we'll encounter one other person – also a Gentile – who ends up getting baptized along with his whole family when he hears the Good News of Jesus Christ! If you brought your Bible, or have a Bible app handy, turn with me to Acts 16:16-34. I'll be reading from the New International Version today. **Read Acts 16:16-34.**

So apparently Paul and his missionary companions have spent some time in the area of Philippi, where all this is happening. The first character we encounter in the lectionary reading for today is a young slave girl, who apparently followed them around for several days. This is no ordinary slave girl. Luke, the writer of the Book of Acts, records, "we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling," (Acts 16:16).

When I was a kid, there was a television commercial which frequently came on, which some of you have probably seen, too. Miss Cleo, the Jamaican fortune teller, would tell you anything you wanted to know by simply calling a 1-900 number, and paying a hefty fee. I never called her, but I suppose what she told people may, or may not have come true. Luke says this slave girl has a spirit – in other words, this girl's possessed by a demon.

Demon-Possessed Slave Girl

I know we don't talk much about that sort of thing, especially in Methodism, but make no mistake friends, our enemy "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour," (1 Pet. 5:8). Satan doesn't work alone – he has flunkies who fell from heaven with him, who help do his dirty work. Now how accurate this gal's predictions were is something we don't know – we aren't told, so it's debatable. She may have been very Miss Cleo-like, or something entirely different.

Notice what this girl does, though, once she encounters Paul. She shouted, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved," (Acts 16:17). It's the same thing the demon possessed man who lived in the tombs said of Jesus Christ in Mark 5:7, when "He shouted at the top of his voice, 'What do You want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? Swear to God that You won't

torture me!” I find it interesting that these demons, despite being enemies of God, recognize His sovereign power, and His servants!

This girl is yelling, and telling the whole town that Paul and his friends are telling people how to be saved. How are we saved, Church? By believing in, and accepting the work done by Christ, crucified on the cross for forgiveness of our sins, and recognizing the promise He gives us when He rose from the dead three days later! You know, I’ve heard people say, perhaps you have too, that the Church, or following Jesus, is a cult. That it’s a made up thing. It’s fiction, and not real.

Cults and Conspiracy Theories

The problem with that thought process – it really boils down to ignorance – is that the same people who say these sorts of things do not have a grasp of history, or how historical evidence is collected. I love history. The American Revolution, the Civil War and Reconstruction era, and the World Wars are some of my favorite things to read about and study. When historians piece together the histories we have in the textbooks, they do it through a process of finding historical evidence, since most no one living today was alive in those time periods. Maybe some people are still kicking from the World War II era, but not very many. Anyhow, historians look at what’s called “primary sources.” Those are artifacts or writings by eye-witness people who were there when the events occurred.

Friends, there are a wealth of early writings in Hebrew and in Greek from secular – non-Christian – historians who were contemporaries with Paul, the apostles, and even Jesus Christ, who document accounts which are very similar to those contained in the Bible. Jesus existed. He really died by crucifixion. And He rose again. You can take it to the bank – it’s not a cult or a conspiracy theory – it’s documented fact.

So this demon-possessed girl becomes such a noisy pain in Paul’s side that he tells the spirit to come out of her – and it obeyed him. (verse 18, paraphrase). Remember now, she’s a slave, and her masters are fit to be tied because their cash cow has left the stall, so to speak. Look what they do. Luke records, “When the owners of the slave girl realize that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities,” (verse 19). They drag them in front of the leaders of the city.

Haters Gonna Hate

Then they make some wild accusations. “They brought them before the magistrates and said, ‘These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice,’” (verses 20-21). In other words, “these guys are disturbing the peace.” This business about “customs unlawful for Romans to accept” is a fancy way of saying Paul and Silas were trying to start a cult. See, unbelief in the Gospel is nothing new – there were people even then

who didn't want to believe. The crowd – as crowds often do – start joining in with the critics. “Haters gonna hate,” as the young people say. So the magistrates – we'd say judges today – order Paul and Silas stripped and beaten, and hauled off to jail.

When the jailer gets ahold of them, he sticks them in maximum security, right? “He put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks,” (verse 24). They're chained up inside the prison cell. I've never been in that situation, and I'm not sure how many of you have been, either. That being said, I'm not sure how I'd react, but in all the pain from the beatings, and the shame of the nakedness, I'm not sure if I'd respond the way Paul and Silas did.

“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them,” (verse 25), we're told. I'm not sure I'd be able to sing in that instant, but these guys did. And apparently the praying and singing had an unexpected impact – I'll get to that in a minute. We aren't told what the cause of the earthquake is, of what caused all the prison doors to fly open and all the prisoners' chains to fall completely off them.

Unexpected Impact

All the shaking and rattling apparently woke the jailer, “and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped,” (verse 27). In Roman society, if you were a jailer, and a prisoner escaped under your watch, you forfeited your life in place of theirs. It was a brutal society! So he's ready to throw himself on the sword to quickly end his shame and distress. Before he can, “Paul shouted, ‘Don't harm yourself! We are all here!’” (verse 28). And then we see the unexpected impact I mentioned a moment ago.

“The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’” (verses 27-28). In the jailer's case, he had to have a near-death experience to realize his need for salvation. Paul and Silas tell the jailer what he must do to be saved. And friends, it's the same thing we'd say today if someone asked us the same thing, “just believe,” right? “They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household,’” (verse 31).

When you have someone in the house completely, fully devoted to following Jesus Christ, it makes the lives of everyone in the house better – even if those other people don't yet believe. In this case, Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house,” (verse 32). In other words, they shared the Good News, and the whole family came to faith! We see the jailer put his faith in Jesus Christ into immediate action. “At that hour of the night,” remember, it's now after midnight, “the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he

was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole family,” (verses 33-34).

Jesus Changes Us

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, His Spirit living inside us changes us, and He makes us into new people. I'm certain that after that night, the jailer never treated a prisoner the same way again. He likely treated them as image-bearers of the One who loved him most. Think of the impact he may have had. The jailer, speaking the Word of life and hope into prisoners awaiting execution. It'll be interesting to someday see all the saints added to God's Kingdom by this particular man, of whom we don't even know his name.

As followers of Jesus Christ, each of us, likewise, have the capacity and potential to make an impact on the lives of those people near and dear to us. Do we make Him known when we have the chance? Here in a minute we're going to recognize the graduates in our church family, and present them with a personalized Bible. In the presenting of it, my prayer for each of them is that they'll use it as a tool to draw closer to Jesus, and to make Him known!

Prayer: Holy God, use each of us as You see fit, to make You known to as many as You would have us encounter. In Jesus' name, and for His glory we pray, Amen.