

Acts 16:16-40 “Fault Lines”

This is the last Sunday of Eastertide. Next week we'll be at Pentecost in the Park worshipping, giving testimony to what God is doing in our lives, eating burgers and hot dogs and all our favorite potluck foods we like to share. Today for our last reading in Eastertide we get to follow up on something we started last week. Last week we met Lydia, a wealthy merchant who, after meeting the Apostle Paul, made a confession of faith that in all likelihood included the phrase, “Jesus is Lord.” Then she and her household were baptized and she became partners in ministry with Paul and his associates and offered her home as a place where they could stay. I indicated that this week we were going to follow up and see just how important that hospitality would be when Paul started preaching and teaching here in the city of Philippi.

Last week I said that whereas Peter's ministry was all about exploring the ins and outs of ministry and discovering how the Holy Spirit works in and among Jesus' followers, Paul's ministry was overflowing with drama. We're going to see a *lot* of that drama in this week's text. Our reading starts out with a brief story about a young woman who was the opposite of the one we met last week. Lydia was a wealthy person who had a lot to offer. The young woman we meet this week has no power whatsoever. She has no wealth. No autonomy. No freedom. Luke doesn't even bother to mention her name. What she does have is the “spirit of divination,” which means the practice of seeking to know the future by supernatural means. Typically, when you hear sermons on this text, preachers want to focus on the dark spiritual dimension of her ability. They want to emphasize her connection to occult practices or having a demonic spirit. Honestly, though, I don't think that's even close to the most disturbing aspect of this story. What bothers me the most is that this young woman is the victim of human trafficking. Think about it. She was a young woman who was owned and controlled by powerful men who were exploiting her for profit. To me that sounds like the very definition of human trafficking. She had some sort of clairvoyant ability and was being kept as a slave by men who were making money from

people who were prepared to pay for her services. Her basic situation was the same as that of women held in slavery in illegal brothels. Again, that upsets me to no end. I can think of very few crimes against humanity that make me as angry as human trafficking. I'm saying this to clarify how much sympathy I have for this girl and how much contempt I feel towards the men who were exploiting her.

That being said, I also need to confess that this makes it hard for me to feel good about how Paul dealt with the situation. The girl was following Paul and Silas around and every now and then she'd cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." Here's the deal -- She wasn't wrong. In the Book of Romans, Paul wrote that he was a slave to Christ. On numerous occasions in his letters to the churches, he said that he came to proclaim a message of salvation. But here in verse 18, Luke writes, "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.'" But wait, that makes it sound like the only reason Paul exorcised this "spirit of divination" was he just wanted her to shut up. I'm not sure I'm okay with that. But remember -- Paul is all about the drama. He's all about the controversy. He's the apostle who causes us to say things like, "Oh ... really? Did you just say that? Did you just do that? Why?" Well, let's take a look at the "why" here in this story. Let's see if we can look beyond what seems to be Paul's impatience with someone who keeps interrupting his teachings. Let's take a look at who he thwarted when he drove the spirit out of this slave girl.

Remember -- this young woman wasn't doing all of this on her own. She didn't have anything that she could truly call her own. She was the victim of human trafficking. By removing this "spirit of divination" from her, Paul put her owners out of business. He took away their ability to make money. Was Paul being a jerk about it? Eh ... who am I to say? Two weeks ago, Peter taught us that it isn't even our business to determine that which is clean or unclean. Do I have issues with Paul dismissing this girl because he was annoyed? For sure. But when I look

at the trainwreck he caused by putting these human traffickers out of business I've got to say, "Bravo ... good job!" That's a big win over human trafficking and it sets the stage for something even bigger.

When the Apostle Paul intervened and set this young woman free the backlash was immediate and savage. Paul and Silas were arrested, dragged before the magistrates, accused of un-Roman behavior – stripped naked, beaten up by a mob and jailed in chains. Powerful profiteers do not take kindly to anyone interfering with their cash flow. We cheer because a young woman got her life back. Her "pimps" for lack of a better term, didn't see anything to rejoice over. They obviously didn't think it was a problem when she was following Paul and Silas around, yelling out, "Hey these guys are all about God!" Because, you know, a little bit of religious fireworks can be good for business. Keeps everybody curious, happy and spending money. It's all good, that is, until religion starts meddling with their ability to do business.

Then the crowd started attacking Paul and Silas for other reasons. The crowd dragged Paul and Silas to the magistrates and 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." Sounds like someone's in trouble for being a Jew. Sounds like someone is in trouble for not being Roman enough in a city that was more Roman than Rome. Sounds strangely familiar to be honest with you. See, this ... what we see in this day and age isn't anything new. It's been going on for centuries. Paul and Silas were jailed for nationalistic and xenophobic reasons. Daggone Jews. Messing things up for all the *real* Romans. Except these "real" Romans were all descendants of foreigners who Rome assimilated into their empire. But honestly, as I indicated before, the biggest reason they wound up in jail is because they disrupted the cash flow of these wealthy slave-holders. That could get you thrown in jail today too!

So how did Paul and Silas spend their time in jail? They were teaching the other prisoners worship songs! Wouldn't it be cool if this was where

the Christ Hymn was written? The one we see over in Philippians 2 with that line proclaiming “every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Oh my gosh, wouldn’t that be priceless? The most offensive phrase you could say to a die-hard Roman patriot is, “Jesus is Lord!” They’d be like, “No, you’re supposed to say *Caesar* is Lord!” And Paul and Silas are over here in jail saying, “Alright, everyone sing it loud and proud – Every knee should bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord!”

That could have caused a riot, but thankfully, a fault line shifted somewhere in the earth and their chains were broken and they were given the opportunity to walk out of jail. Except, Paul saw that the jailers were about ready to take their own lives because they knew that the magistrates would put them to death for allowing the prisoners to escape. So what did Paul do? He told the guards the good news of Jesus and they all got baptized along with their entire households! Here’s where it gets good. Here’s where you’re glad that Paul likes to stir things up. When the police came on the scene after all this wreckage Paul and Silas caused, both to the jail and to the very citizens who were willing to shift their allegiance from Caesar to Jesus, they said, “Oops. Our bad. The magistrates didn’t realize that you were all Roman citizens so they told us to come to you and let you go. No harm done, yeah? Run along now. Go in peace.”

See, I think maybe if this was Peter, he would have said, “Yes. Thank you very much. We’ll be going now. No hard feelings.” But this is Paul. Paul the honey badger of the apostles who won’t back down from *anything* for *any reasons* says, “No. Not okay. We’re not going to ‘run along’ or ‘go in peace.’ Your magistrates are going to have to come here themselves.” And when the magistrates showed up, they apologized to Paul and Silas! “We’re so sorry. We didn’t realize you were Roman citizens. Please just leave. We’re sorry!” And you know what Paul and Silas did? They didn’t go anywhere except back to Lydia’s house right there in Philippi. Why? Because they established a *partnership* with her, and it paid off. They had a place to stay. They had a base of

operations there in the city of Philippi ... which became one of the strongest churches in that region. And I'm sure when they came back to her house, they said, "Oh my gosh, have we got a story for you!" And who is this story about? Hey, it's Acts. Every story in Acts is about the Holy Spirit working in and among unlikely people so folks like you and me can know the good news that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. I think the best thing about this story is the questions it raises, and I want to leave you all with two questions to think about –

Question number one: If someone like this slave girl from the story were following you around blurting things out about who you were and what you stood for, what exactly would they be saying about you? Would they be saying, "This one has been sent by God to challenge us to re-think our priorities and to put an end to any and all who would exploit or harm God's children!" Or would they say, "Yeah, this one tries really hard to be nice most of the time and wants everyone else to be nice too!"

Question number two: If you were one of the town magistrates, and someone came to town preaching and teaching truthfully and prophetically ... what do you think would provoke the angriest reaction from you ... even if you knew at some level that it was a divinely inspired message that came straight out of scripture? What is it that you instinctively reject as going too far ... as threatening our cherished values or our constitutional rights? What would make you mad enough to drag someone before the authorities and have them beaten up and jailed, the way that Paul and Silas were? I guess another way to pose this question is to ask, "What changes do we find ourselves blindly resisting or defending ourselves against?" These are important questions to consider because every day that we get sucked deeper into the vortex of this increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world is a day where we have to ask the question, "When are we going to say, 'enough is enough,' repent, and call for others to do likewise?" When are we going to allow the Holy Spirit to grant us the courage to be like Paul? When are we going to learn to stand up for what Jesus calls us to do no matter the odds or the consequences? And when the magistrates

and the traffickers and the power brokers and the lobbyists and the politicians who don't have the guts to stand up to any of them tell you to move out of the way, you plant yourself like a tree beside the rivers of truth and you say, "No ... *you* move."