

#117
May 17, 2020
Acts 16:16-24 (CEB)

¹⁶One day, when we were on the way to the place for prayer, we met a slave woman. She had a spirit that enabled her to predict the future. She made a lot of money for her owners through fortune-telling. ¹⁷She began following Paul and us, shouting, “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!” ¹⁸She did this for many days.

This annoyed Paul so much that he finally turned and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!” It left her at that very moment.

¹⁹Her owners realized that their hope for making money was gone. They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the officials in the city center. ²⁰When her owners approached the legal authorities, they said, “These people are causing an uproar in our city. They are Jews ²¹ who promote customs that we Romans can’t accept or practice.” ²²The crowd joined in the attacks against Paul and Silas, so the authorities ordered that they be stripped of their clothes and beaten with a rod. ²³When Paul and Silas had been severely beaten, the authorities threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to secure them with great care. ²⁴When he received these instructions, he threw them into the innermost cell and secured their feet in stocks.

Pentecost – which many people call the birthday of the church – comes 50 days after Easter. The book of Acts starts with the ascension of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Since last year we have been continuing to study the Book of the Acts of the Apostles which could also be called the Acts of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the first followers of the Way. We took a break for Advent and Christmas and then for Lent and Easter. I felt it was also necessary to take time to address our coping with COVID.

It is a joy for me, this Sunday, to come back to Acts! This year, May 31 is Pentecost Sunday. Maybe I will have to start all over and see how far we can get over the course of the next year.

We left off in February with Lydia, a resident of Philippi, whom Paul met on his second missionary journey. She was an influential, successful, independent business woman who was known as the seller of purple. God opened her heart, she heard and accepted Christ as her Savior. She insisted that her home become a place of hospitality.

Today we meet another woman. She is very different from Lydia. She had no name, no wealth, no power, no home. She was under double bondage. She was a slave girl who was also enslaved by a demonic spirit.

The word that is used in the Greek text is Python. Python was the name of an ancient mythical earth-born dragon or snake. The name Python was subsequently used to denote a prophetic demon. She was able to predict the future.

As I was researching about this, I found that most likely she had a very weird way of speaking while in a trance. This girl uttered responses from her stomach without moving her lips. People who did this were called “belly talkers”.

Her spirit was enslaved by a demon and she was owned by other people. She was treated as a very profitable piece of property. Her owners made a lot of money because of her ability to predict the future.

Let us pause and ask ourselves, to what or to whom are you and I enslaved? We might not think of ourselves as physically in bondage. What controls your thoughts, your spirit, your attitude or your mind? We might think that we do not have a problem with this but can readily think of someone else who is.

Whether we realize it or not we all are slaves of something or somebody. I absolutely have to have my coffee in the morning. Good chocolate is another must in my life! There are certainly much bigger and more serious addictions, dependence and emotions to which we are slaves. How many of us have separation anxiety when our cell phone is not working correctly?

Many of us do not realize how much time we spend playing video games or watching TV. Worse is when we can not admit.

Usually it is an unconscious habit. We let something or somebody rule our lives. I constantly have to check myself on how I spend my time. What are my choices in free time? I always have to remind myself when I spend money. I might not have much, but where do I spend what I have? My spending betrays what I care about the most. It is so convenient and easy. Just with one click I can order anything I want. What do I want? What is my heart longing for? Whom do I serve?

What directs your decisions, affections and behavior? What do you believe will give you meaning, joy and satisfaction? Why there is a gap between knowing and doing? Obeying?

Day in and day out, this young girl – a mentally unsound girl – followed Paul and Silas. While following, she was shouting, “These people are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming a way of salvation to you!”

This mentally challenged young person was telling everyone that Paul and Silas had the answer.

At first glance, it looks like she was saying the right things. It was not her, but the spirit within her. When Jesus encountered demon possessed people, the spirits would proclaim Him as the Son of God. He would rebuke the demons and command them to be quiet. Evil recognizes Jesus and recognizes the Holy Spirit. They know who has ultimate authority. The evil one not only knows God, but also proclaims. But in the end knowing what the Bible says will not save you. Demons are forced to obey Jesus.

It is a good reminder for us all today. Knowing who Jesus is does not mean he is your Master. Knowing about God is not enough. In the second chapter of his book James gets sarcastic: “If you say you believe in God, good for you. Even the demons believe and they tremble, shake with fear.” The issue is whether we obey God and do the things He requires – do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. Yes, it is necessary to speak but we must also act our faith.

The demon that is inside that slave girl was saying, “These people are servants of the Most High God.” How interesting! But it is true. You are either a slave to the things of this world like that girl or a servant of God. The difference is that being a slave of God gives you true freedom. You should not be surprised because the Gospels are filled with paradoxes. Be humble and you will be honored. Give to be rich. Be weak to be strong. Lay down your life for Christ’s sake to have life. Be a servant of God to be free in your Spirit from captivity.

***If the Son therefore shall make
you free, ye shall be free indeed. ¶***

(John 8:36-KJV)¶

Paul put up with this girl as long as he could and finally he was getting annoyed. He turned to her and said to the spirit in her: “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to leave her!”

In the name of Jesus Christ: In the most powerful name which is above all names. “All hail the power of Jesus’ name.”

I wonder if Paul was thinking about this slave girl in Philippi when he later wrote a letter to Lydia and the rest of the Philippian church. “God has highly exalted Jesus and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The demon was forced to leave the girl because Paul invoked the highest authority of all creation.

It is a nice story but how can we relate this to our lives today? There are a few faith-healers and televangelists. Some churches practice calling upon the name of Jesus to cast out various demons. We call these people names like holy rollers or fanatics. Most of us, though, prefer to play it safe.

We still believe in Jesus and the power of His name, but what if it does not work? What will people think about me? So we would rather not try. Staying safe and maintaining the status quo is the best.

Maybe you tried and nothing happened so you will never try again. We lose so much with that mentality. We do not want to look foolish. **What is worse: looking foolish in the eyes of this world or in eyes of God?** Paul wrote in I Corinthians:
¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved (1 Cor 1:18). Which is foolishness: praying in Jesus' name so somebody to be healed and delivered from sin or not praying? We decided to pray quietly so we will not be embarrassed. We know what the Bible says about those you are ashamed of Christ...

It would be wonderful if the story stopped here. The girl was delivered from slavery to both the demon and the men who owned her. It would be even better if we would hear a word about the slave girl or a word from her. All we get is silence. Maybe it is because there are still so many who are in a different kind of slavery today. Maybe the story continues today and calls us today to break the bondage and to seek freedom through Christ.

stand·fast·therefore·in·the·
liberty·wherewith·Christ·hath·
made·us·free,·and·be·not·
entangled·again·with·the·yoke·
of·bondage... (Galatians·5:1·KJV)¶

One day Jesus' used the text from Isaiah for his sermon. "Spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim release and liberty to the captives ...and freedom for those who are oppressed." He then said, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled."

Do not give up. Do not be afraid. Do not stay in any slavery of this world: even if you have tried hundreds times and have been praying for years and are still seeking. Continue to seek, pray, ask and call on the name of Jesus Christ. Seek those who can support you, encourage you and keep you accountable.

The story is not really about the girl. It is about God and His love and grace. It is about the power of the Holy Spirit over every person and everything including demons. It is a call to be slaves of the risen Christ who in turn gives us true freedom.

The story continues and now all the attention is on the owners of the slave girl. They realized that their hope for making money was gone. It is a hard case. What do you do? If you are a fisherman and your boat sinks you collect insurance. Farmers buy crop insurance every year. Every employer is required to provide workers comp and every employee pays unemployment insurance. How do you buy insurance on a demon possessed girl?

The real tragedy is that the owners could not celebrate the girl's new life. They were too upset about the loss of income. Many of us can understand what it is like to lose a job or a business. When our finances are shaken we have to make an extra effort to protect our humanity toward one another.

"They grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the officials in the city center. ²⁰ When her owners approached the legal authorities, they said, "These people are causing an uproar in our city. Listen to these words: "Grabbed" Dragged". It gets worse from there. What is their accusation against Paul and Silas?

They do not present their real reason: the loss of income, but pretend to be very patriotic and caring for the Romans. They charge them with disturbance of the peace. Seriously? It was better to live with demons and have a demonic possessed girl around. Is that peace? **How it is that living with evil and being slaves to money is better than freedom and peace with God?**

On the contrary, Paul had silenced a disturbance of the peace by casting out the demon.

We know crowds and how easily they are swayed. A couple years earlier the crowds shouted "Hosanna" one day and within a few days screamed, "Crucify Him!" This time Paul and Silas were the victims of racism.

²² The crowd joined in the attacks against Paul and Silas, so the authorities ordered that they be stripped of their clothes and beaten with a rod. ²³ When Paul and Silas had been severely beaten, the authorities threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to secure them with great care. ²⁴ When he received these instructions, he threw them into the innermost cell and secured their feet in stocks.

Paul and Silas were arrested and abused for doing good. There was no trial. Whenever Christians speak out against injustice and challenge the way people make money, trouble will follow. If pockets are touched, you will get a reaction.

A question every one of us should ask is: Do I earn my money by serving or by exploiting others such as those slave girl owners?

This victim of bondage with no name, living in Philippi, reminds us of truths we already know. Jesus Christ holds the highest power. In His name we are saved and given new life. In His name there is liberty and we should seek, pray for ourselves and others to be free from all servitude, from all the addictions, from all the worries and to continue to have bold faith. Belief means to obey the risen Master. Being a Christian is

not about being comfortable. In fact, you will probably find yourself misunderstood and suffer if you are faithful to Christ's call to follow Him.