

The Ministry of Irritation

Acts 16:16-34

May 16, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

Acts 16:16-34 ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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." ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, "These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews ²¹ and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates had them stripped of their clothing and ordered them to be beaten with rods. ²³ After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. ²⁴ Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. ²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹ The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹ They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³² They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³ At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴ 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.

When you travel to foreign lands, you expect to see unusual sights, hear the rhythms of different tongues, inhale the odors of exotic foods. You expect to learn about other customs, observe styles of dress and manners that diverge from what you're used to, and handle currency or coinage that have characters you can't decipher and values you can't figure out without a calculator. You expect to see shrines and monuments to national heroes or divinities and acts of worship that diverge from what you know back home.

What you don't expect is to be hounded to death by some weird girl with pretended powers of clairvoyance, who has this other-worldly sing-song voice which she casts like a ventriloquist putting words in other persons' mouths. She tells fortunes, she makes predictions. For the right price, she contacts your dear departed. What you want when traveling abroad is to just blend in, not stand out. Paul and Silas had business to attend to, yet here was this pestilential priestess shrieking in a voice like shattering glass telling anyone within earshot who you are, what you're doing here, and why you're doing it. What they expected was to just go their way and stay out of trouble, yet Paul and Silas end up being arrested and thrown into jail for disturbing the peace.

If you know anything about Paul, you know he had a rather – shall we say – tightly wound personality. So when this pest of a slave girl began sticking to him like a tick on a hound, her grating, fingernail-on-blackboard voice announcing their every move, it was more than enough to make the patrician, eminently self-possessed Apostle Paul lose his cool. Clearly, he figured, she was bedeviled by some sort of evil spirit, so he called in the heavy artillery and in the name of Christ did an exorcism. And, finally, the girl shut up.

We could stop there, I suppose, and simply say this is a story about exorcism. In these ancient times, all maladies were spiritual maladies. All disease was caused by demons and wicked spirits. Jesus was a healer; he drove evil out of people and made them well, and he equipped his disciples for this ministry, as well. So, Dr. Paul quashes the spirit within the girl and sets her free.

But that's not the crux of the matter. As soon as the girl falls silent she falls right out of the story. The big issue, we learn, is not that the girl was annoying to the extreme, but that she had handlers who earned a lot of money off of her. If evil were simply something that afflicted an occasional individual, it would be fairly easy to deal with. The trouble with evil is how gregarious it is. Evil has a corporate mentality and likes to organize things.

Our translation of scripture says the slave girl had "a spirit of divination." What it says in the original Greek text is that she had "*a python spirit*." The python was the symbol of the Greek god Apollo and soothsayers were known as *pythons*. Due to Paul's meddling, the girl's handlers suddenly found themselves with a soothsayer slave whose crystal ball had gone blank. Never mind that this was slavery and a form of human trafficking. Never mind that the only interest they had in her was commercial and a bogus business based on flimflamming the tourists. All that mattered to them was that their revenue stream had been shut down at the spigot, and by meddling foreigners, yet! When they find their hope of making money is gone, they swear out a complaint against Paul and Silas, charge them with "advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe," and have them beaten and thrown into jail.

Though this story takes place over two thousand years ago in a land far away, the *python spirituality* that stands at the center of the story is very

much with us. I'm not just speaking of the slave girl's fortune-telling and soothsaying act, though I'm not really up on what the *sooth* market is like these days. What is so contemporary is the true *python spirituality* which is on display in the self-interest, greed, and prejudice of the slave girl's handlers, those who, in reaction to having lost their business, had two innocent strangers brutally beaten and locked up. What is contemporary is how easy it is to stir up fear and loathing in the citizenry against strangers, foreigners, those who worship differently, speak differently, or anyone who can be labeled differently. Note the way the girl's owners characterized the presumed criminal intent of Paul and Silas: "These men are disturbing our city...they are Jews." They don't observe our customs. They don't worship our local gods. Their values are not traditional Roman values. They are trying to destroy our way of life.

How many times have we heard variations on that? They are strangers...they are different...they dress funny...they are a different color...they are Jews, they are Arabs, they are illegals.

Greed and prejudice were the social foundations the girl's owners were standing on when they made their charges, and it must have been comforting to them to see the city rally around in support, and it must have reassured them to see the local authorities back them up. That's the true "python spirituality" – the ethic that justifies doing whatever it takes to make money, the ethic that makes foreigners the fall guys for disappointment. It's a python spirituality that puts a price on human dignity and reduces human rights to the whims of the privileged and powerful. Evil loves company. We like to think evil is an infection in individuals, but the host is social and in some very toxic ways we are all its victims.

Paul and Silas were in Philippi to encourage the few Christians there and spread the good word. We can imagine they did much good in that regard, when they were allowed to. But it's worthwhile pointing out that perhaps the most significant thing Paul did was to become vexed, annoyed, and angry, and then use his anger by do something about the problem. He didn't go home and kick the dog, he didn't just grouse under his breath to Silas, he didn't just think to himself, "Well, that's just the way it is; what can I do about it?" He intervened. He protested. He said in so many words, "I've had it up to here and I won't take it anymore!" He turned on the irritating girl and changed her.

Venality, self-interest, prejudice, law and custom twisted for the sake of personal gain – what an old, old story that is. What is to be our reaction to it? Assume it's part of the fabric of things and keep still? In doing so, we adopt the python spirituality, when actually – like Paul – we have a call to the ministry of irritation. Each of us, when our welfare is threatened, is too willing to cooperate with the python spirituality which determines right and wrong based on the pocketbook, or fear, or prejudice. Python spirituality is the morality of pride, power, the almighty buck, the go-along-to-get-along quid pro quo. The old cutting jokes sniggered indiscreetly about within families and between friends, the slurs against the victim of the day cooked up to keep us from having to change, broaden, open up and become less the center of our own narrow universes. There's nothing new about bigotry, of course, and nothing new about greed and economic self-interest dictating perverted notions of public morality. Python spirituality abounds. Shall it take over our souls without a fight?

"Where your treasure is, there will be your heart, also." Where are our hearts? What are our values? Where is our energy invested, and for

what reason? What is God calling us to do with our lives, our wealth and our time? Where are the resources of our society invested? Are we promoting the common weal or just our own? Do we define what is good based on our fears and prejudices, our ideologies and privileges, or on our faith and on our hope? Thomas Aquinas said, "It is the heart of sin that people use what they ought to enjoy, and enjoy what they ought to use." Thus, we enjoy our money and use people, instead of the other way around. Thus, we enjoy getting rich and use God's creation, instead of the other way around.

Python spirituality makes decisions based on self-interest and then defends them in the name of morality and righteousness. The spirit of Christ uses intelligence, wealth, and power to be a blessing to the world, to make peace, to exorcise the spirit of greed, to liberate the captives, to bind up wounds, to announce God's grace to the world. Jesus came to make us irritating. He said we must be as gentle as doves, but as wise as serpents. This is a different spiritual herpetology than the python one by which the world usually lives. We, like Paul and Silas, need to look around, to see the various statues erected to all the little gods which rule our lives, and recognize that we are living in a garden where the snakes always want the last word. We have a better word, one that frees the slaves, and lifts up the downtrodden, and speaks for justice and mercy. Let's get irritated and pray for a grace sufficient to drive the snakes out of our own souls and reclaim the world for the doves.