

“What Happened to the Slave Girl?”

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First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL

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Acts 16:16-18

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.

For two weeks I've been wondering about the slave woman that Paul healed in Acts 16:18. When Paul healed her, we think immediately that that's good news.

Was it? Am I a heretic even to ask?

When she was healed, she lost her income. She had what Luke called a “spirit of divination.” That was her business, her bread and butter, and when she lost her gift, her employer (those who owned her and exploited her) had no use for her.

Yes, she had freedom from the spirit that seized her, and she may have been released by her owners, but where would she go? How would she make a living? Was she educated? Without a GED, could she get hired on at the local Taco Bell? Where was she going to live? Special gifts are often misconstrued as mental illness, and mental illness wrecks families; could she go home? Had she burned too many bridges? Did she have a network of support she could draw from? Did she have friends to call upon? Where was the church? Did they welcome her in?

I see a bereft woman on the streets near Philippi, or Amphipolic, or Apollonia—this is where Paul, Silas, and Luke had been wandering. I worry for this unnamed slave woman. Never mind her long-term prospects, where was she going to sleep tonight?

Change came for this slave woman, and as I read this text, it was thrust upon her. She didn't ask for it. Her life was going along fine without it. (Have you ever experienced change like that, where one minute things are fine, and the next everything trusted and true turns upside down?)

If the slave girl had a network of support, of family, of friends, of a community of faith I'd feel better about her prospects on the pages of Acts 16.

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This week I've seen what the network of support looks like.

- On last Sunday, 27 members and friends of our church gathered at Salt and Light grocery to shop. By shopping there we are strengthening that ministry's ability to grow and better support neighbors in our community who need affordable food and supplies for living. Salt and Light is a part of the network of caring in this town.
- Mindy Watts-Ellis told me about last week's day-long mission trip, a "Stay and Serve" event that went to Taylorsville to clean up after the terrible tornadoes last year. Kids worked hard. Dave Bauer, Itch Jones, and Dave McNattin helped worked with 11 youth and their leaders Mindy, Sabrina Hwu, and Lizz Pippin.

Rev. Michael Evanchek, pastor at the Presbyterian Church in Taylorsville, reported at the Presbytery meeting last week that the very first to contact him to offer help was the First Presbyterian Church in Champaign.

On the way home, the team stopped at a local restaurant. The manager asked what they were doing; Mindy told him about their work in Taylorsville. When she got the bill, he had knocked off 15-percent. "People in Taylorville need you, and we appreciate the help."

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Did the slave girl have a network that was going to help her get her life back together? Without a web, what hope did she have? Did she have a team that would gather around with support?

Are YOU going to help her?

How are YOU going to reach out?

Sometimes what the church does to "help" actually hurts. Our giving can become toxic when we keep giving hand-outs but not hands-up. To really help requires relationship not just well-intended donations.

This week I've been noticing what a support network looks like. I've seen neighbors helping neighbors.

- In Virginia Beach two weeks ago 12 people (13, including the shooter) were shot to death by a man who purchased guns legally and used them to kill coworkers. I wrote my friends at the beach: Who did you know? Who did I know? Word began to trickle back. Andy Thompson went to school with one of the women. The husband of our former ODU campus chaplain knew every one of those killed. Grace Covenant Presbytery Church of Princess Anne, a few miles off Sand Bridge Beach, and ten minutes away from the Municipal Center convened prayer services. Everybody is going to everyone else's funeral. These shootings are terrible and people will light fires under their conversations about responsible gun control, about mental health,

and being good neighbors. What happened to the shooter? What got broken inside of him? Did he not have a friend to talk to, a church to pray in, a healer to bless him? Was he out of network? *Bless the grieving people around the world who have been punished by this violence.*

- I met an old fella at Presbytery this week. Bob Holloway is an elder at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Sparta. His eyes lit up when he found out I was your pastor here at First Presbyterian Church. He proudly said, "I milked my way through U of I." (I had no clue what that meant.) He milked cows every twelve hours, at 3 a.m. and 3 p.m. "I never saw a whole football game, cause I had to go milk the cows." He was part of McKinley Foundation; the choir, he said, was awe-inspiring. He was nurtured there, and from time to time was nurtured here at First Presbyterian Church. *The communion of saints who no longer populate these pews but who are here with us now, welcomed that young man in. "We" were part of his network of support.*

The people of Virginia Beach are leaning mightily upon one another. Blest be the tie that binds. Bob Holloway had a web, a support network.

Did that woman in Acts find such a network? Did somebody in the church step up, introduce themselves, and say can I take you to sit down at Kopi Café and buy you some lunch?

My walk these past two weeks has been going for web to web of caring saints.

- Last week Rachel and I were invited to attend a dinner with friends from the Mosque. The Ramadan fast had ended; now it was time to eat and relax at tables of food and friendship. The kingdom of heaven looks like this, I told somebody. There was no hunger. There were no tears.

But danger looms: As recently as one week ago an armed, supposed Christian was found in the mosque in Chicago "praying." He was posing as a Chicago police officer; he had come to kill Muslims at prayer.

Omer said, "Pray for us." I said I will.

Then I looked at him and said, "Pray for us, too."

These prayers, these dinners, every time we teach together, every time we shop together, every time we pause to visit our neighbor, we are weaving a network together between brothers and sisters of every stripe, and Muslims and Jews and Taoists and Christians, and pagans, and humanists and holy rollers are becoming the community that God intends.

Did that woman in Acts meet such people? Are you going to be that person this week?

David Brooks wonders about how we make connections in these trying times:

These different kinds of pain share a common thread: our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, distrust, tribalism, shaming and strife.

On Dec. 7, 1941, countless Americans saw that their nation was in peril and walked into recruiting stations. We don't have anything as dramatic as Pearl Harbor, but when 47,000 Americans kill themselves every year and 72,000 more die from drug addiction, isn't that a silent Pearl Harbor? When the basic norms of decency, civility and truthfulness are under threat, isn't that a silent Pearl Harbor? Aren't we all called at moments like these to do something extra?

Brooks sees "social Isolation" as "the problem underlying a lot of our other problems." He started a group at the Aspen Institute about re-weaving our social fabric. He says we need a nation of weavers.

We're living with the excesses of 60 years of hyper-individualism. There's a lot of emphasis in our culture on personal freedom, self-interest, self-expression, the idea that life is an individual journey toward personal fulfillment. You do you. But Weavers share an ethos that puts relationship over self. We are born into relationships, and the measure of our life is in the quality of our relationships. We precedes me.

Who reached out to that woman "healed" by Paul in Acts? Was she all alone?

This is how I hope the story ended: Paul and Silas went back to this woman and apologized for treating her rudely. Then, they invited her to join their organization, to join the church, to travel with them. I would like to hear that Paul and Silas connected them to Peter's mother in law, gave her a family to join, somebody who could make potato soup for her and give her warm tea with honey and lemon. I hope Paul and Silas introduced her to the women who were the early leaders of the church, because when a woman is hurting she doesn't need a bunch of well-meaning men standing around wringing their hands, she needs women to support her in ways only women can. I want to hear that this slave girl is connected to a meaningful, and loving community, a world wide web of compassion.

Jesus told his disciples in John's gospel that when he, Jesus, got to heaven, he'd send the Holy Spirit (he called it the "Advocate") to descend upon them with comfort and power. And when the Spirit washed over the early church, it didn't divide people, but brought them powerfully, pentecostally together.

I pray this slave girl knew the power of God's Spirit working through the hands and expressions of love, the coffee and music and laughter and attention that surrounded that girl all alone on that sidewalk in Acts.

And I beg of YOU, please continue to work HARD building that kind of world here, and that kind of church from these resting-pews.

One more story about the web of care and justice that YOU are weaving.

- Patty and Bruce Farthing recently vacationed in Washington DC. At the hotel, the doorman walked their luggage upstairs and bid them farewell. Patty thought the man looked familiar. He was African, she thought, and he had an accent that sounded like he could be from the Congo. She asked him where he was from. Indeed, he was from the Congo. She beamed: "I go to a church where many Congolese worship with us." He asked where. She said Champaign. He said, "I've been to your church!" Many years ago there was a terrible wreck on the interstate near here involving three Congolese. One died and one was hospitalized. The other woman was this doorman's sister, and he had come here to help care for her. And he brought his care to THIS church. And he found care in THIS church.

Let the Spirit's wind continue to blow through this place.

AMEN.