

“From Preachin’ to Messin’ ”
Acts 16:16-34
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Preached Sunday, May 20, 2007 at San José, Costa Rica

It’s a staple of many a cop show on television, and countless Hollywood movies, that whenever someone tries to help a woman escape prostitution, her pimp shows up and either beats her into submission or threatens the do-gooder. For those of you not familiar with the word “pimp,” it describes the person who controls and markets a prostitute, typically both her friend and enemy. They take a percentage of what she earns in exchange for things like clothing and protection. Pimps obviously have something to lose when a prostitute leaves the streets: a product line is removed from the shelves, their profit margin is squeezed, they will have to go out and find another victim to fill the slot that would be left by the one escaped. As a rule, pimps don’t like to work. That’s why they are pimps. They get other people to work for them, and prey on the desperation of those willing to pay for the services of their “employees.” So when someone comes around messing with the merchandise, pimps strike back. They always do.

The slave girl in our story from Acts was not a sexual prostitute but a spiritual one, and her owners not pimps as we typically understand them, but pimps of the spirit, peddlers not of flesh, but of spirit. They were using her, renting her out, so to speak, to the same kind of desperate folk who visit prostitutes, only in this case, folk whose desperation was of a more spiritual nature, people whose

need for the divine led them to seek wisdom or prognostication through means other than Christ, other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that we know so well. The text tells us that these pimps made a great deal of money by using the spirit of divination that had resided in her and that enabled her to do the kind of fortune telling that people thought they needed. The people who paid for her service would have been those who wanted to know what people have always wanted to know: will I find happiness, will I prosper, will I find the right mate, will I make it through this or that crisis? In the Roman empire in those days, everybody had an answer for these questions, but it seems that she was a popular choice, and those who owned her were not about to let anything stand in the way of their profits. And so when Paul casts out the spirit of divination, the pimps strike back and Paul and Silas find themselves first at the wrong end of whips and sticks, and then with their feet in stocks in the innermost cell of the local prison, meaning the darkest, dingiest, most cockroach and rat-infested place you can imagine. We might imagine that instead of praying and singing hymns, as we are told they did, they would have been justified in lamenting the fact that no good deed goes unpunished. But the witness of the gospel they preached in the light of day was not dimmed in the darkness of prison, and their singing in the dark was a testimony to the others who had ended up with the same fate.

Tonight I'm going to leave Paul and Silas in prison and concentrate on why they ended up there in the first place, and why maybe we should too. The text says

that this fortune-telling slave girl was following Paul around for days shouting a most interesting thing. She was saying to all who would hear, “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way to salvation.” Now, examining these words, you would think that this would be a helpful asset to Paul’s ministry since he was, at first glance, preaching the very same thing. Paul often used the metaphor of servanthood or slavery to characterize his relationship with God. He would never describe himself in terms other than being the inferior member in the divine relationship. On top of that he was proclaiming a way to salvation, just as she said. Everywhere he went, Paul shared the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection and the power that had to bring people into relationship with God. So far, the slave girl, or at least the spirits who possessed her, seem to have it right. What, then, would possess Paul to discard the free advertising?

It turns out that we have probably been betrayed by reading these words in English and by reading them two thousand years later. You see, if we were gentiles -- non-jews, Romans, or barbarians living in that Roman city of Phillipi -- and we heard the words “Most High God,” we most likely wouldn’t have thought of the God we know and love today, or the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob that Paul and Silas knew so well, but in fact Zeus or some other diety who could be associated with words of such grandeur. You see, the words she was using in Greek were words typically used by other religions to describe their Gods in the

loftiest of terms. And so rather than being an asset to Paul, rather than directing people to Paul's actual message, she was encouraging them to misunderstand the Gospel, to point away from Christ. Paul knew that the language she was using was being misunderstood by those who passed by. Furthermore, although Paul himself might have embraced the terminology of slavery to Christ, it was probably not too popular to those around him and would have discouraged the average citizen from finding out what he was really all about. Who would want to sign up for slavery? And so Paul has enough of this foolishness, and goes from preachin' to messin' and casts out this spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

I suspect that Paul wrestled with the decision to take this action. After all, it took several days for him to reach this boiling point. I suspect that Paul was well aware that no good deed goes unpunished and that there would be a price to pay for tinkering with someone else's livelihood. It would not serve the interests of the Gospel for him to pick unnecessary fights, and so he likely resisted the urge as long as he could until he decided it was worth the consequences. You see, doing the right thing isn't always doing the easy thing, or the safe thing, or the comfortable thing. Sometimes doing the right thing alienates you from you family, or lands you in jail, or puts you six feet under. Sometimes doing the right thing is physically painful as well as emotionally painful. Sometimes doing the right thing is the last thing you want to do, but you do it anyway, because God has burned into your heart the value of doing the right thing for the sake of Jesus Christ and God's

love for the world. And so Paul loses this woman of her spirit and lets the proverbial chips fall where they may. And you know what happened to him.

Paul went where we all need to go, but where it is not easy to go: he went from preachin' to messin'. Going from preachin' to messin' is what they say in the black church tradition when the preacher starts calling out particular people to keep the promises they've made, when the preacher starts telling an unpopular truth, or tackles social issues, when the preacher touches a nerve, when the preacher takes on real life, when the preacher goes beyond the language of the world yet to come and starts talking about the world that is here. It's when you cross the line and step on toes and touch untouchable people. It when you do what Jesus did. Martin Luther King, Jr. the preacher went from preachin' to messin' when he led the Birmingham bus boycott. Dietrich Bonhoeffer the preacher went from preachin' to messin' when he got himself involved in a plot to kill Hitler. But it is not only preachers who take that extra step. Going from preachin' to messin' is when a friend stops telling a woman to leave her abusive husband and takes a battered woman by the hand and leads her somewhere safe. Going from preachin' to messin' is when someone actually leaves the table where the popular kids sit and sits with the loner at the lunchroom table instead of hoping somebody else will. Going from preachin' to messin' is when you risk retaliation for the sake of the life God has given each one of us.

To the owners of the fortune telling slave girl, Paul and Silas were perfectly acceptable preachers. In fact they were good for business. It was like a food court for spiritually hungry people. Everyone knew where to come to find a variety of solutions to their hunger and some would choose Paul and some would choose this slave girl, and that was fine because there was enough to go around. But when Paul turns in his competition to the spiritual health department, when he shuts them down, he goes from preachin' to messin'. When he frees this woman from that which left her a spiritual prostitute, when he frees her to be able to hear the gospel message whether she chose to accept it or not, when he makes it possible for others to hear what he really has to say, he is taking a risk with grave consequences. And the pimps strike back. They always do.

There is no shortage of spiritual pimps, people and institutions who use others to prey on the needs and desires of human beings, whether those needs and desires are for security, happiness, or meaning in life. The various new age religions and vague "spiritualities," the ones with crystals and cards and stuff like that are the more easily identifiable forms of spiritual prostitution, but those prostitutes usually just market themselves without the need for a pimp. These are the low-hanging fruit of self-deception. If the truth be told, the more dangerous spiritual pimps are those with the power to harm those who would go from preachin' to messin'. I'm talking about such things as patriotism and capitalism and the cult of beauty and youth. I'm talking about forms of our own Christian

faith that promote conformity or prosperity or exclusivity. These are the kinds of ideas and industries that too often take our raw human wants and needs and use them against us and our God to profit the pimps who put them on the streets. It is all well and good to be a citizen proud of one's country but as much as God shows no partiality among persons, God is also no respecter of nations. It is a fine thing to advocate for one's preferred form of economics but another to blithely overlook the destructive consequences to God's creation of that same system. It is a wonderful thing to care for one's body, the temple that God has given us, but a tragedy when the pursuit of the perfect body prevents the search for one's soul. Religion and faith are not incompatible with nation, or way of life, or outward appearance, and indeed the pimps love it when we are all in the same spiritual food court together. But it is when the language and vocabulary of the two realms get confused and are shouted out to point people away from God, like the spirit did using the language of "the Most High God," it is then that we must, like Paul, go from preachin' to messin' and do what we can to cast out the spirits which are leading people away from the life God offers the world in Jesus Christ. It is when patriotism becomes nationalism and dissent becomes a sin, and when capital and profits become more important than compassion and character, and when youth and beauty define who is societally acceptable or expendable, that we need to do a little less preachin' and a lot more messin'. And then the pimps will strike back. They always do.

The pimps may always strike back but the good news of the Gospel is that we have a God who doesn't just preach, but does a little messin' too, a God who raised from the dead a certain preacher and who sent along a little earthquake to open the doors of Paul and Silas's jail and who accompanies us through all the messin' we are called to do. The ending isn't always a happy one, just ask Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but it is always a victorious one. May God help us to have the courage to be more than just preachers of the Word, and to rejoice in the consequences that come our way. Amen.