

“When Annoyed . . . Do Ministry”

2 June 2019: 7th Sunday of Easter
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571
Preaching Text: Acts 16:16-34

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“Reprimand not a child immediately on the offence. Wait till the irritation has been replaced by serenity”

(—Moses Hasid).

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Hear the day’s lesson, 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 (Acts 16:16-34).

Paul, Silas, and Timothy bring Christianity to Europe for the first time. Now in Philippi they visit the Jewish community worshipping “by the river,” an outdoor “place of prayer.” There they meet businesswoman Lydia. After hearing the good news, she converts to “the Way,” the Christian faith. Next two miracles: the cure of a possessed girl from by evil and an “earthquake.” The young woman’s cry reminds us of other possessed people Jesus healed. There, too, evil spirits recognized God and spoke the truth. Paul continues what Jesus began; it is Jesus who cures (“in the name of Jesus” . . . 18).

The agora, (“market”) was the local “authorities” seat. In the agora “magistrates” heard legal cases, with the city jail nearby. The young woman’s owners bring two false charges against Paul and Silas: disturbing the peace and urging Roman citizens to practice a foreign cult (20-21, a law usually ignored, but used when expedient). The owners stir the “crowd” into a frenzy; then the authorities carry out justice immediately—escorting Paul and Silas to jail. The “earthquake” is an exhibition of God’s presence: being beyond the natural, it is a miracle. For a prisoner escape, the authorities would likely put a “jailer” to death; this jailer instead chooses suicide. In verses 30-33 we read of the conversion of the jailer and his family: he asks the key question, to which Paul and Silas reply with a brief statement about the “way to salvation.” After instructing them in the faith, Paul and Silas baptize the whole family.

What was going on this text that would irritate or annoy Paul so? Recall from our story, a young woman who made money for others because of her affliction follows Paul around. She was, as the text tells us, one who had “a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.” Another construal was that a demon/spirit beyond her control possessed her. As she followed Paul, she kept bellowing out: “These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” “She kept doing this for many days.” It is disconcerting when public speaking to have others interrupting, no matter how correct or helpful they are trying to be. Once at a hospital and as a novice pastor, a family asked me to pray over a dying Pentecostal woman. As I prayed, someone said something and I stopped. Then I realized that they said “Amen” and “pray for her, brother.” Yet, it was still distracting. Most Methodist pastors are not used to having people respond when they speak.

In any event, it was not the young woman who spoke, rather the Acts text reads: “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.” Because the Spirit annoyed/irritated Paul, he cast out the spirit. Paul healed her from her affliction. But because the healing provoked those who made money from her affliction, the owners convinced the authorities to send Paul and Silas to jail. There, they saved the jailer’s life. In due course, Paul and Silas baptized the entire household.

WWJD or “what would Jesus do” is a phrase we occasionally see on stationary, posters, jewelry, and the like. Few of us imagine that irritation/annoyance would abide in Jesus’ deportment. Thus, Paul may be a better guide for us. Despite Paul’s irritation, God used him in a spectacular way to disclose God’s power. There is a lesson here for us. We too can use our irritation to build God’s kingdom.

Chuck Swindoll relates this story of irritation:

Imagine all of the obstacles a person might have to overcome if he were to walk from New York City to San Francisco. One man who accomplished this rare achievement mentioned a rather surprising difficulty when asked to tell of his biggest hurdle. He said that the toughest part of the trip wasn’t traversing the steep slopes of the mountains or crossing hot, dry, barren stretches of desert. Instead, he said, “The thing that came the closest to defeating me was the sand in my shoes” (Chuck Swindoll, *Growing Strong*, p. 163).

I am not Jesus and you aren't either. My life's sins are always a lot closer to Paul's than they are to the perfection that Jesus represents. Yet, out of Paul's irritation, he did ministry. This is important for many of us to remember. Every day there are situations that frankly irritate me. Luckily, I irritate others as much as they irritate me. *What are we to do with our irritation? Get mad and withhold our pledge to the church? Are we to quit worshipping? Quit our Sunday School class? Are we to throw up our hands and say that even God can't work with these people or this individual?* No! No! No! God calls us to what I fancy to call "the ministry of irritation." God calls us to keep on working and praying. God is not finished with any of us yet!

I close with Tom Erickson's story about a public library. It has a system called "Dial-A-Tale." Anytime a young child wants to hear a fairy tale, he or she can call the number and a voice comes on reading a short fairy tale to the listening young ear. Yet, the number is only one digit different from Rev. Tom Erickson's number. Because small fingers often slip-up, Tom gets frequent calls from a child wanting to listen to a fairy tale. After several unsuccessful attempts to explain a wrong number to the small child, Tom felt he had only one alternative. He got a copy of *The Three Little Pigs*, and placed it by his phone. Now, whenever a child calls, he simply reads them the tale.

This is a lovely instance of yielding one's personal rights. Rev. Tom didn't, as you might have thought, change his telephone number to avoid an "invasion of his privacy." In its place, he simply did ministry.

As a friend of mine once said: Go and do likewise!"

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