

“Divining an Act”

May 16, 2010: Acts 16:16-34

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“So you have chosen to study Divination, the most difficult of all magical arts. I must warn you at the outset that if you do not have the Sight, there is very little I will be able to teach you. Books can take you only so far in this field...”

—**Sybill Trelawney**, Professor of Divination at Hogwarts.

Divination was a subject taught in the third year of studies at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Harry Potter fans in the congregation will re-call that Harry and his pal Ron Weasley, didn’t like the Divination class but stuck it out by making up answers about predicting the future.

On the other hand their companion Hermione Granger had great difficulty in the class, where she always disagreed with Professor Trelawney. At one point in their studies, Professor Trelawney tells the class, “The fates have informed me that your examination in June will concern the Orb, and I am anxious to give you sufficient practice.” To which Hermione exclaims, “Well honestly...‘the fates have informed her’... Who sets the exam? She does!” Hermione sees through the smoke and mirrors of the professor’s ability to foretell the future.

Hermione’s insight also ends up saying a lot about your average seer or diviner. Regardless of whether it is Professor Trelawney, a gypsy women named Madame Anastasia using a crystal ball or tarot cards, the man behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz, or the young slave girl who had a spirit of divination in today’s reading from the Book of Acts, divination is often not much more than, well . . . an act!

In our scripture passage today, Paul and his companions are in the Greek city of Phillipi. As they go to a place to pray they encounter a slave girl who had a “spirit of divination” and whose owners profited greatly from her fortune-telling skills. For several days after their encounter, the slave girl follows Paul and his friends around town shouting, “These men are the slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.” Like other daemonic spirits in the Gospels, this one recognizes the superiority of the Deity which Paul and his companions proclaim; namely the God of and in Jesus Christ.

Paul eventually becomes so annoyed by this slave girl’s relentless screaming and yelling that he exorcizes the daemonic spirit out of her. Evidently even truth-telling demons can get exasperating after a while!

Naturally this exorcism enrages the girl’s owners. The proverbial goose that was laying the golden eggs is no longer producing. As a result the owner’s cash flow comes to an abrupt end and they are not happy campers. So they forcibly take Paul and his companions to the local court house where they are charged with disturbing the city by advocating unlawful ideas.

Phillipi being a Greek city, the primary religion of the populace would have been the paganism of Greek mythology. Because Paul and his followers were evangelizing, it was their Christian faith which was seen by the local authorities as being an unlawful idea and causing the disturbance in Phillipi.

Let’s examine the text for a moment; in particular two phrases, both of which reveal a richer understanding of what is taking place. When the slave girl yells out that Paul and his company are, “slaves of the Most High God,” she is using an expression that was also used of Zeus, the king of all the Greek gods. Her owners likely adhered to the worship of Zeus, and even the slave girl may have done so.

So when she cries out that Paul and company are, “slaves of the Most High God,” she is in fact, recognizing the supremacy of the Christian faith over and above Greek paganism; over and above Zeus and the pantheon of Greek gods. The residents of Phillipi who thought that the words uttered by the divining slave girl were authentic, her proclamation about Paul opens up possibilities for him

to convert people. If she has powers to predict the future, then she must also be right in predicting these men are followers of an authentic God. So people listened to Paul - and most likely some converted - because they believed the girls divining ability. It is a classic case of God using a bad situation for something good.

Another phrase in the text is the one used to describe the spirit that possesses the slave girl; "a pythian spirit." Pythian derives from the word Python; it recalls the myth of Python the dragon, or serpent that guarded the Delphi oracle at Mt. Parnassus. In the world of Greek Phillipi, the name and legend of Python were well known and people attached its use to someone with clairvoyant powers, or perhaps more mundanely, to someone engaged in the trickery of being a ventriloquist or a charlatan. In contemporary parlance we might use the expression, "He has a Pythian spirit" in reference to someone who we believe engages in seductive subterfuge, or simply put, is a snake in the grass.

This then begs the question: did Paul exorcize someone who was really possessed by a daemonic spirit, or someone who was just acting; which would imply no actual exorcism. If it is the later, the slave girl was certainly one very smart cookie. I think it's possible she actually believed in Paul's new Christian faith, and through him saw a way out of her enslavement. So she harangues Paul enough to compel him to perform this exorcism thereby freeing her from this life of sham and also of being enslaved; which when you think about it is a pretty authentic exorcism! Better to be a slave to the God of salvation than a slave to the Pythian behavior of your enslavers!

In either event, whether she was truly possessed or just engaging in clever trickery, the slave girl is enormously convincing in her divinations, well either that or the people of Phillipi were enormously gullible since she, "brought her owners a great deal of money by her fortune-telling."

As in Phillipi there is no shortage of tricky, Pythian spirited people manipulating religion, or gullible people who swallow their trickery hook, line and sinker in our churches today.

The theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that, "we are, all of us, a mixture of love and fear. We go back and forth between them; when we are addressed in love, we are able to be open, receiving, peaceable, ready to be concerned for others; When we are overpowered by fear, we are likely to be hidden and closed, either cowering or aggressive, agitated and anxious, mostly preoccupied with ourselves. We go back and forth, trying to sort it out, yearning for love, reacting to the power of fear."

This on-going love and fear struggle in us which Brueggeman identifies is what empowers charlatans in the Church to sell their snake oil religion to gullible people; gullible people who constantly live reacting to the power of fear. And these charlatans with Pythian spirits play on that fear for their own aggrandizement.

Religious leaders playing on fear are the primary reason why right-wing, reactionary, evangelical Christian churches are brimming with people. Their leaders understand this fear all too well- they even may be fearful themselves - and they play on that fear to grow their churches, often for selfish reasons.

The fears that people react to, which send them fleeing to these churches, are numerous: Fear of people different than themselves, people of color, gay people, and poor people. Fear of change in any form, fear of science, fear of progress, fear of intellectual discourse, fear of ambiguity, fear of a pluralistic society, fear of viewing the holy scriptures as anything other than the literal word of God.

Instead of preaching the love of Jesus Christ which frees us from the bonds of fear, these tricksters work over-time to enslave people to their fears, and they do so by manipulating the Holy scripture to their own devises. Frankly there is no salvation in any of this; people who fall for this modern day wizardry end up being no better off than the enslaved girl in Phillipi. They are in bondage to fear, listening to the utterance of nonsense words antithetical to the Gospel of freedom. Adding insult to injury, they are then convinced to dig into their pockets and pay for the privilege!

If you believe – or know of someone who believes - in scriptural interpretations or preachers that cause you to live in a perpetual state of reacting to your fears, you - or they- are an enslaved person. Enslavement to fear is contrary to God's desire for us. Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “[In Jesus Christ] you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear.” (Rom.8:15a)

And in the first letter of John, the writer proclaims, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . .the one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (I John 4:18)

So yearn for love. Be open to the limitless possibilities of the life God has given us and seek the presence of Christ in everything you encounter, because Christ is there! Welcome the stranger, the person different from you, welcome them as if they were Christ himself. Forgive without measure all who harm you. Be peaceable, open, vulnerable, risk-taking, open to new ideas as you and God continue to be co-creators in this world. As our UCC friends say, “do not put a period where God has placed a comma!” People who live in fear place periods. People who live in love place commas, so be a comma placer! All these things lead to the perfect love that drives out fear. What a gift it is to be freed from the bondage of fear!

Now, being a mere Muggle I am no diviner, but I will predict this: If you live in the spirit of love given to us by Jesus, the shackles of fear that enslave you will fall away. And that perfect love will allow you to know the Most High God, the One who is the source of all life and all love. And that's a prediction you can count on! Pretty awesome, isn't it?

Amen.