

## **Weekly Reading – Monday, May 10, 2010**

### **Acts 16: 16-34**

It's all about the story in Acts. You can forget about listening for theological discussion; you can forget about definitions of grace or justification or sanctification. In Acts, all you get is the story. And what a set of stories we have this week.

First, there's the spirit possessed slave girl who can't help but follow Paul and his cohorts around Phillipi declaring their identity and purpose for all to hear. It grates on Paul's nerves until finally he's had enough, and in the name of Jesus, demands that the spirit leave her. And it does. There's no fanfare, no big to-do. The spirit simply leaves her. It would seem that the spirit-realm is no match for the power of God working through Paul.

That's all we see of the slave girl. But that simple, liberating act of Paul's sets all kinds of balls rolling. When God's power is active in the world, often the powers that be are challenged. That's what happens in the next story. If the slave girl no longer has her spirit of divination, she is of no monetary value to her owners. Their abusive livelihood is threatened. In response to the exorcism, the slave owners could have been struck with awe; they could have changed their ways; they could have even set the slave girl free. Instead, they choose to try and get rid of Paul. But flogging and prison cannot stop what God is up to through Paul.

Third story: An earthquake breaks the prisoners' bonds; they all stick around anyway. After surviving the earthquake and discovering the miracle of a full prison, the jailer falls to his knees. His response to witnessing God's power is awe and fear, and ultimately, faith that will express itself in generous hospitality. Too bad those slave owners didn't respond in a similar manner. Their lives could have been transformed too.

God is active in the world. How we respond to it seems to matter a great deal.

### **Revelation 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21**

It's true that much of Scripture is most powerful when it is read out loud in the company of others. That is definitely true of the book of Revelation. It was originally written to be read out loud in the community of faith. If you can, have someone read this passage out loud so you can feel the words and images wash over and through you, reaching deep into your bones. And one other thing: cheat and read the omitted, intervening verses too.

Imagine being an early Christian, persecuted for your faith, part of a small community that somehow is viewed as a threat to Rome. Imagine living in fear, some days wondering whether sticking to this faith in Jesus is worth it or not. Imagine looking around in despair and wondering if the world really will ever be

different, will ever be made new, will ever mirror God's intention for it. Imagine wondering why it is that those who oppress others and abuse their power seem to succeed, while the humble and faithful suffer at their hands.

And then listen to these closing words of Revelation. Hear the power of the promises spoken. Be uplifted by the proclamation that the Alpha and Omega will ultimately have the final word. In the omitted verses, hear the promise that evil will not always have the upper hand. And if you are feeling weary of heart and soul-thirsty, hear the invitation to come and drink of the water of life as a gift.

It is a gift. It is offered to each of us. How we respond does seem to matter. But why in the world would we not come to the water to be satisfied by grace? Why would we not want to have the darkness of our night be lit up by the Bright Morning Star of God's love and mercy? And how can we not join in the final shout with all the faithful of every time and place, crying, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus"?

### **John 17: 20-26**

This week we listen to the end of Jesus' "Last Discourse" in John's gospel. Jesus has been praying for his followers. He is soon to be arrested and crucified. But right now he is praying. We catch the final words of his prayer. And what wonderful words they are. As you listen to Jesus pray, hear the prayer as a prayer for you because that's what it is. Jesus prays for those who are with him then and for all those who will come to believe in him through what others tell us. That includes us. Jesus is praying for you and for me.

And what is his prayer for us? Over and over again, he prays that we might be one. Now, we could talk about how divided the church is, and bemoan the fact that Jesus' prayer has not come to fruition in our time. However, it's not clear that this is what Jesus means when he prays that we might be one. His heart's desire is that we might be one in the same way that he and the Father are one. What does that mean? In what ways are Jesus and the Father one? What kind of unity are we talking about here? Well, it could be the kind of unity that comes when one is totally wrapped up in love. Remember what it feels like to be in love; how you don't lose your own identity (in fact, you feel even more your true self), but there is some larger entity of which you are now a part too? I think Jesus is talking about something like that. In fact, his final promise is that he will make God known to us so that God's love will be in us. Wrapped up in love, made one with one another in love. That's the oneness Jesus means.

But Jesus doesn't stop with the love, making that the end and final goal. There is a purpose for the gift of that love, for the necessity of our unity in love. The purpose is so that the rest of the world may come to hear and welcome the radically good news of God's love for each and for all. That is God's true desire for all. Let us join our voices with the faithful of all time and place, crying, "Amen. Let this be so!"