

Exploitation, intimidation, transformation

Acts 16:16-40

May 16, 2010

This is the story of four people: a fortune-teller, two evangelists, and a corrections officer. This is a story about exploitation and intimidation and transformation.

The fortune-teller was a young woman, a servant girl, a young woman with a special gift -- she could see the future. Do you know anybody who can see the future? I don't! And yet the world is still filled with fortune-tellers and tarot card readers and mediums and astrologers.

I don't pretend to understand what's going on with all that stuff. Some of it, maybe most of it, is simply a con game, but some of it -- some things that happen, some things that people experience -- some of it is hard to explain.

I don't try to explain it, but what I do not understand does not disturb me, because of what I do understand! I have nothing to fear from mysterious spirits or powers or things I cannot explain, because I know the One who is Lord of all of them! And the truth of this world, the only truth that matters, is simple and plain and accessible: that this world, and we, are God's good creation; that we, and this world, are loved by God; that we, and this world, will be made whole, made new, by God.

So, I take this story at face value. This young woman had the ability to predict the future, because she was possessed by an evil spirit! This was her gift: being controlled by an evil spirit. What a "gift!"

And with this "gift," she made lots and lots of money ... for her owners. For her owners! She was owned. She was a commodity. She was an economic asset. She was a victim, not merely of the evil spirit, but of the evil of the businessmen who exploited her.

This is exploitation: to make a profit at the expense of a person, to rob a person of their humanity, to ignore their needs and to sacrifice their well-being, for the sake of personal gain.

When southern plantation owners made money on the backs of enslaved African-American men and women and children, that was exploitation.

When fast food companies, Taco Bell and Burger King among them, work Florida farm workers ten and twelve hours a day picking tomatoes and pay them only a little over a cent a pound, that is exploitation.

When drug dealers peddle addictive and dangerous substances, making money at the expense of their clients' health and well-being, that is exploitation.

Isn't it equally true, then, that the business of the tobacco companies is exploitation, making a profit by selling a product that is known to be harmful to its consumers?

When banks sell sub-prime mortgages to financially vulnerable people that can't afford them, that is exploitation.

When Goldman-Sachs sells investors securities that they themselves are betting against, making money in the process, lots and lots of money, without regard for the best interests of their clients, that is exploitation.

When "holy" men and "holy" women enjoy lavish lifestyles built on donations from needy people looking for spiritual comfort, that is exploitation.

Exploitation is all around us! Without a sense of higher duty, without allegiance to a higher authority, an economic system predicated on the aim of maximizing profit is readily susceptible to that evil. Paul himself said it: "The love of money is a source of all kinds of evil."

Money itself is not evil, but the love of money, the desire for money, the choice to make financial gain the topmost priority, does result in all kinds of evil. And it is people that pay the price.

Paul should know. He paid the price. When Paul commanded the evil spirit to leave that young woman in Philippi, when he healed her spirit and set her free, he left her "owners" without their cash cow.

That's why he and Silas ran into trouble there, not because people were threatened by their message, not because of any religious or moral objection to what they were doing, but because they messed with somebody's business interests. Jesus ran into trouble in Jerusalem for much the same reason.

I listened to an interesting story this week on National Public Radio about the causes and effects of the "Prohibition" amendment and its repeal. One of the leading proponents and financiers of the repeal effort was the business magnate Pierre DuPont. His motivation had little to do with any concern about the benefits or risks to the American people posed by legalizing the sale of

alcoholic beverages, or with any matter of political principle. He merely wanted to shift some of the tax burden from the income taxes he despised to the taxes that could be levied on alcohol sales. It's all about the money.

Paul and Silas got in trouble because of money. They were dragged to the public square by the servant girl's "owners" and presented to the town officials. The Roman authorities listened to their complaints and then had Paul and Silas stripped and whipped and jailed.

Because? What was their crime?

There was no crime! There was not reason to prosecute them or hold them. The officials intended all along to release them the next morning. It was all about intimidation, making sure these troublemakers, these disturbers of the peace, these outsiders, these Jews, understood who's in charge. It was all about power: running a tight ship, nipping any potential threats in the bud, keeping things under control. And intimidation is the tool of power and control.

I heard this week the comments of an Arizona official about that state's new immigration law. He said the point of the law is not to yield a great number of arrests, but simply to make Arizona an inhospitable and uninviting and threatening place for illegal aliens. In other words, it's about intimidation. Just go somewhere else! Just stay out of our state!

It was about intimidation in Philippi, too. The beating and imprisonment were meant to induce shock and awe, to inculcate fear, to keep Paul and Silas in line and encourage them to go away. Only it didn't work. What they were they doing in the jail at midnight? Praying and singing hymns of praise to God! And once they were released, before they left town, they went back to Lydia's house and spent some time with all the believers there. They were going to keep right on doing what they were doing!

It is telling how quickly the attitude of the Roman officials changed once Paul told them that he and Silas were Roman citizens. Oops! But why, oops? What difference does it make? It makes a difference, because to the Romans, there were two classes of people, two entirely different classes of people treated with entirely different levels of respect -- those who were Roman citizens and those who were not, insiders and outsiders.

Followers of Jesus make no such distinction, because Jesus made no such distinction. There are citizens of the Kingdom and those who are invited to become citizens of the Kingdom, those who are found and those who are not yet found.

Jesus crossed all kinds of social boundaries, speaking one-on-one with women, eating with tax collectors and prostitutes, welcoming outcasts, touching lepers, treating Samaritans with respect.

Paul and the other apostles took up where Jesus left off, breaking down barriers between men and women, between Jews and Gentiles, between free people and slaves, between rich and poor, between insiders and outsiders.

And that's what the rest of the story is about. The keeper of the Philippian jail was to good Jews, like Paul and Silas, a Gentile, an outsider, and on top of that, the agent of their persecutors. But to the Romans, he was a simply a good soldier, fulfilling his duties, no questions asked. His job was not to make judgments, just to carry out orders. So he did what he was told, installing Paul and Silas in his most secure jail cell and padlocking their feet.

And then, at midnight, came the earthquake! The jailer was jolted awake, saw the cell doors wide open, assumed his prisoners had all escaped ... and drew out his sword, ready to kill himself.

Suicide? Why? Because of the shame of failing in his duty? Because of fear of the anger of his superiors? Because of the disgrace he would suffer before the faces of his family and his peers?

Was this the honorable thing for a good soldier to do in such circumstances? Was this the honorable thing for a good Roman soldier to do? What a life! What a bitter burden of responsibility and shame to bear! Can't we say, in all fairness, that this man was exploited, too, that his life was made to be worth nothing in the context of his usefulness to the state?

But he was set free, too! His life was transformed, transformed by the grace of God, transformed by the grace of God offered to him by Paul and Silas.

"Don't do it! Don't harm yourself!" Paul shouted. "We are all here! We are all still here!" And the jailer saw. He saw the awesome power of God in the earthquake, but, even more awesome, the power of God's mercy.

His life was changed, completely and forever. He was transformed, he and all his family. And they were filled with joy -- filled with joy! -- because they now believed in God. Do you think he will ever contemplate taking his own life again?

He was still a man of honor, not neglecting his duties. He did not release Paul and Silas until ordered to do so. He was still a jailer, but a different kind of jailer, because he was a different kind of person.

He took Paul and Silas into his own house and washed their wounds and gave them food. He treated them, not just as prisoners, not just as assets to be secured as part of his job, but as people, giving them the respect and care they had given him.

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Which of these three forces is strongest?

Which of these four people were transformed?

And what, do you suppose, God can do with you?