

Today we continue reading from the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of the New Testament book of Acts. Acts tells us the stories from the early church and the beginning of the spread of Christianity.

Last week we read from the first part of chapter 16 about Paul and Silas being led by God to the town of Philippi. There they encounter a woman named Lydia who welcomes them into her home and becomes the first Christian from Europe.

Today we will be reading about Paul and Silas encountering another woman. But this encounter is going to raise all kinds of issues. It will lead to a challenge of an economic system as well as transformation of many lives.

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

“Can you hear me?” screamed Darcy as she tried one last time to breathe life into her friend. Startled, she felt a warm body rub up against her, followed by a familiar whisper. “It’s no use. She is dead.” After wiping the last icy tear from her cheek, Darcy stood up next to her friend, shivering, as the two little hedgehogs leaned into a howling winter wind.

“How many does that make this year?” Darcy asked, doing her best to keep her voice from cracking. “I’ve lost track. Seven? Maybe eight?” replied her friend. “Dammit, this has to stop,” said Darcy.

If the rest of us want to see spring, we need to bundle together at night to keep warm.” Despite wanting to argue with their prickly leader, the rest of the hedgehogs didn’t complain when Darcy laid down the orders later that night.

The next morning Darcy woke up and made her rounds. She was ecstatic to see that all of her friends were accounted for. However, as soon as she finished roll call, chaos ensued: “I didn’t sleep a wink,” yelled one of the hedgehogs. “Me neither,” said another. “I can’t count the number of times I was pricked last night,” screamed a third.

The hedgehogs knew what was at stake, but the very next night instead of sleeping in a pack, some of the hedgehogs crept off so they wouldn’t be annoyed by their companions.

The next morning the hedgehogs were met with the all too familiar sound of Darcy’s screams, “Todd? Todd? Where are you? Can you hear me?” Just like so many times before that winter, Darcy’s plea was met with silence.

“How many of us do we have to lose before you listen to me?” Darcy cried as she turned towards the rest of the gang. “Sleeping together sucks, and being pricked all night drives me nuts, but finding another hedgehog dead is too much.

Until the last flake of snow melts, we are sleeping together. End of discussion. If anyone doesn’t like it they can leave now.” The rest of the hedgehogs exchanged glances but none of them had the courage to move.

“Good,” shouted Darcy. “When the sun starts down I want all of you here so we can keep each other warm.” Over the next few days, the hedgehogs were grumpy. They were groggy. But they were all alive.

Finally, on the fourth day of sleeping together, one of the older hedgehogs broke the quiet. “You know what... Last night wasn’t so bad.” Another agreed. “I didn’t sleep soundly but after a while, being pricked a bunch didn’t really annoy me.”

Months later, the hedgehogs were spotted playing in the green fields of May. Despite the coldest winter in years, every single one of them was accounted for.

Darcy was annoying to the other hedgehogs, demanding that they bundle together through the cold and snowy winter months. None of the prickly hedgehogs wanted to snuggle with others.

It was uncomfortable. It meant a certain loss of freedom. But Darcy annoyed them into looking out for each other because by caring for one another they all were able to survive.

In today's text we encounter someone who is described as annoying. We are told that Paul and Silas meet an enslaved girl who is possessed by an evil spirit. But what is immoral about this encounter is that this girl is being abused by others who use her deformity to make a profit for themselves.

The girl, though, cries out. For several days she shouts out and draws attention to Paul and Silas. Paul is described as very much annoyed by the girl. So much so that he turns toward the evil spirit and calls out to the spirit to come out of the girl.

That does not sit well with the men who had enslaved her for their own profit. They seize Paul and Silas and take them before the government officials. They testify to the authorities that Paul and Silas are destroying their way of life. You know religion is fine until it gets in the way of economic gain at the peril of the oppressed.

Paul and Silas are then thrown into prison. That's what usually happens to people without financial means when the powerful complain about them disturbing the status quo. They are thrown into the darkest part of the jail.

But Paul and Silas do not lament their misfortune. Instead, they lift up songs of worship. Worship that is an act of resistance against the worldly powers.

And God hears their praise and prayers. For suddenly there is an earthquake and their chains are broken. The jailer is terrified and threatens to kill himself. The Roman authorities are going to blame him for this prisoner escape.

“What must I do to be saved?” he cries out to Paul and Silas. Paul and Silas convince him that suicide is not the answer. Instead, faith in Jesus Christ is the answer for his way forward. Paul and Silas provide the jailer and his family baptism and a new perspective on life.

Darcy the hedgehog was annoying to the other animals because she knew that survival depended upon the hedgehogs joining together. The enslaved girl was annoying because her freedom from oppression depended upon it.

But now the question for us is this. What are you willing to be annoying for? What are you willing to be a nuisance to someone else over because you have been called by God to do something to make an impact over something that needs to be changed?

Are you called to be annoying to our legislators to do something tangible to save the lives of children killed by gun violence or do we continue to settle for thoughts and prayers but no action? Are you called to be annoying on this Memorial Day for the family members of our deceased veterans who need support and proper medical care?

Are you called to be annoying to powerful people that you are aware of that are taking advantage of innocent people like the “owners” of the enslaved girl in our text today?

On this Memorial Day we see lots of flags. We live in a great country. We are blessed with so much by being in this country. But don't let our greatness keep you from being annoying. Don't allow ourselves within the Christian church to be co-opted by the powerful into simply supporting the status quo.

Instead, may the red stripes on the American flag remind you of the blood that was shed to protect our freedoms but also to remind us of the innocent blood being shed by too many children and adults today from senseless violence.

We are not called to be silent in the face of violence and oppression. We are called to be annoying. And being annoying will probably not be well received.

Remember that Paul and Silas were thrown in prison for challenging the powerful. But God liberated them so they could keep being annoying.

Keep your eyes open to what God is revealing to you and then go and be really annoying in order to try to correct what God is revealing to you is wrong. AMEN.

+++++=====

-Thompson, Michael, <https://psiloveyou.xyz/the-next-time-someone-annoys-you-remember-this-story-61948c4d71ce>

-Given: May 29, 2022 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)