

## Easter 7, Year C

- If you've come to the adult forum when I've talked about Scripture, then you've heard me say something that tends to be controversial among a lot of modern-day Protestants
- We Protestants tend to believe that Scripture is for everyone, meant to be read by everyone – and that part is absolutely true
- But we also often believe that the meaning of Scripture is clear just from reading the text, that we can get a “plain sense” of Scripture – I always have to say that isn't quite true
- Our story from Acts today is sort of a perfect illustration of just how much meaning there can be in the text that isn't always obvious at the outset
- Even if we stick just to the first part of this reading, the story of Paul and the slave girl – there's no way of reading this text simply, of getting a clear understanding of everything that Luke might mean for us to understand from it
- That may not be a surprise to you, if you've ever read this story and found it a little difficult to swallow – if that's you, you're actually in good company
- If you read for a “bare sense” of this particular passage, it just leaves you with a lot more questions than answers
- Why does Paul get so annoyed by this slave girl's ability and proclamation of who he is and what he comes to offer?
- Why would Paul not want someone coming along saying he is a slave of God and is proclaiming the way of salvation?
- Why would his reaction be to cast out this spirit of divinization?
- What happens to the slave girl after the spirit of divinization is gone? Is she set free? (Not really likely; it wasn't the spirit that led to her being enslaved to her owners) – Or is she treated even worse by her owners because she is no longer profitable for them? (Entirely possible, unfortunately)
- If this is truly just what it appears to be, not only does it not paint Paul in a flattering light, but it's difficult to even understand what the point of the story actually is – it's just an exorcism that doesn't leave the person exorcised much better off, and perhaps even worse
- So we have to look a little deeper – at the tradition, and what it's had to say, and to dig further into the text itself, especially in the Greek
- And the instant you do that, something jumps out
- That “spirit of divinization” that is possessing the girl is a much more interesting turn of phrase than the English translation would have you believe

- What she has, the Greek says, is a *pneuma pythona* – a spirit, a serpent – a spirit of Python
- So how on earth does that come to mean a spirit of divinization?
- To find out, we have to go delving into Greek mythology – where Python was the name of a serpent, maybe even a dragon, that dwelled at the center of the world – and for Greeks, the center of the earth was a place called Delphi
- And Python, I should say, was the child of Gaea, one of the Titans, the old Gods in Greece, the ones who came before Zeus and the rest of the well-known Olympian gods and goddesses
- And so, there at Delphi there was a rather well-known oracle, that all the Greeks consulted to know what the future holds – and this oracle was controlled by Python – the high priestess there, who delivered the oracle, was even known as the Pythia
- And Python controlled the oracle right up until the Olympian god Apollo came and killed Python, and took over Delphi, and the Oracle, and the Pythia
- Now because this is easily the most well-known sooth-sayer or oracle in Greece, there's a little bit of brand recognition going on in Luke
- Just like a lot of people will call any tissue a Kleenex, Luke refers to this girl have a *pneuma pythona* – a spirit of divinization, an oracle spirit
- But it isn't just associated with that, with the ability to tell the future
- Laying in the background, behind that definition of the word, you have this excellent example of one god replacing an earlier one, of Apollo demonstrating superiority to Python by killing Python and taking over Python's Oracle and high priestess
- So when Paul encounters this slave girl, this girl who has a *pneuma pythona*, and then casts it out – Luke's audience is meant to be subtly reminded of this idea of one god replacing another
- Only in this case, Paul demonstrates the one true God's power not simply to take over and do what has always been done – but rather to do something entirely new – to put an end to divinization that requires people to be possessed by Spirits, and instead set them free from those Spirits
- But, of course, we can't convey all of those shades of meaning in a single English translation – so we wind up with a “spirit of divinization”
- Now, you might be asking yourself, “What on earth was the point of all that?”
- And that's a fair question – I know that not everyone shares my enthusiasm for the nerdiest of translation issues

- But it's an excellent illustration of what we mean when we say that we need to take Scripture seriously – that while sitting down and reading our Bibles is a good start, a necessary first step – it isn't sufficient if we really want to hear everything that Scripture has to say to us
- But Scripture isn't an end unto itself
- The reason that we read and study Scripture, why we seek out the many different messages that lie in and beneath the text is not because that makes us a good Christian
- We read and study Scripture because Scripture is one of the primary means by which we encounter and come to know the one, true, and living God – it's the testament of our crucified and risen Lord
- It is one way by which God deepens the relationship that God has with each and every one of us – by which God reveals who God is and what God is all about
- Scripture simply points us in the right direction, toward an ever-deepening relationship with God