

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, August 7, 2022
10am

Text: Acts 16:9-15 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

As I was studying this week's lesson from Acts, I was struck again and again by how the simplest stories in Scripture often have hidden depths. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us that "the word of God is living and active" (4:12 NRSVUE). I have always understood that to mean that when we read Scripture under the influence of the Holy Spirit, we should be prepared to be surprised by fresh interpretation and new meaning.

I thought I knew the story of Lydia. She is one of only a few women in the early church that the New Testament writers name. And among that select few she stands out for several reasons. Lydia was "a dealer in purple cloth" (v. 14), which tells us two things: She was wealthy, and she was well-connected. She was wealthy because purple cloth sold at a premium – producing it required extracting dye from shellfish called murex that live in the Mediterranean Sea. Because purple cloth was so expensive, it was a luxury item only the wealthiest Roman citizens could afford. Lydia's wealth and her connections to the Roman elite probably made her a prominent figure in the Greek city of Philippi.

Lydia also stands out because she had the privilege of overseeing her own household. We know this because, after her conversion, “she and *her household* were baptized” (v. 15). *Her* household – not her husband’s or her father’s or her brother’s, but *her* household. In a time and place where women were legally the property of men, Lydia was financially independent. This independence helped establish her as a leader in the Philippian church.

So, in a handful of tiny details the Scriptures tell us that Lydia is someone important to pay attention to.

What I didn’t pay attention to in the past was *why* Lydia was at the riverbank on the Sabbath, poised to meet Paul and his traveling companions. To understand why we must go back several verses before today’s reading.

At the beginning of chapter 16, Paul is in Derbe and Lystra – cities in present-day Turkey. Paul meets Timothy, who joins him in his missionary efforts. The two of them travel from town to town, sharing the gospel with those who will listen. They are pretty successful; the early church is growing in faith and numbers. So, Paul and Timothy decide it is time to take the gospel east into Asia. But the Holy Spirit stops them. In fact, the Scriptures say they were “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia” (v. 6).

‘Forbidden’ is a strong word. There are few things more disappointing than being told ‘no’ when we are passionate about something, when we have a vision for the future and expectations of how things ought to be. I imagine Paul and Timothy felt disappointed, even a little chastened, by God’s strong rejection of their plan to go to Asia. Still, they obey the word of God that has come to them. Instead of going east, they set their sights northwest to a region of Turkey called Bithynia.

But once again, the Spirit stops them. As Scripture tells it, “They attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (v. 7).

How exactly did Jesus communicate his intentions to Paul and Timothy? Perhaps through a theophany, like the burning bush or Paul being struck blind on the road to Damascus. It's more likely, though, that Paul and Timothy found their way to Bithynia blocked by something mundane. The small things that disrupt our plans – a flat tire, a minor illness, bad weather – are always at the Holy Spirit's disposal. We never know what God may use to prod us in one direction or another. Discerning the will of God for our lives requires a willingness to suspend both disbelief and our own sense of direction. Sometimes God blesses our plans; other times, God disrupts them. But faith teaches us to trust that in the blessing *and* the disrupting, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28, NRSVUE).

Paul and Timothy were indeed called, just in a direction they did not anticipate. Having found their journey to the east and to the north blocked, they head west to Greece. Which brings us to the beginning of today's Scripture lesson.

At this point, the narrator, Luke, inserts himself into the narrative. "During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" Luke continues, "When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (vv. 9-10).

Being convinced. How do we know when our sense of conviction is from God and when it is just our own ego working against us?

Discernment between the two takes experience. I was once convinced that I would never pastor a church. And yet here I am. “Man plans, and God laughs,” right?

And up until a few months ago, I was convinced the bishop would not move me this year. In fact, I planned on it. Until I got the call from the District Superintendent telling me otherwise. That phone call was *my* man from Macedonia – a message from the Holy Spirit telling me to prepare to change direction.

It is human to confuse our plans with God’s plans. We all do it. The mark of discipleship is being open to correction by the Holy Spirit. Following Jesus requires a willingness to sometimes change direction, trusting that God’s sense of direction is stronger than ours.

What Paul and Timothy did not know when the Holy Spirit pointed them in the direction of Greece is that already God was making a way for the church in Europe. And Lydia was the key to that vision. Paul and Timothy thought they were going to meet a man in Macedonia and give him aid. But it was Lydia that God called to the riverbank that day. She was a Gentile, not a Jew, but God loves to use the people we least expect to bring God glory. “The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul” (v. 14). Before Paul and Timothy met her, God was already working on Lydia’s heart, gently molding it into a posture of curiosity. At the same time God was guiding Paul and Timothy toward Greece, God was tilling the soil of Lydia’s heart, preparing her to receive the Gospel.

Paul did not expect to meet Lydia on that riverbank – a woman, a Gentile. But it was Lydia’s conversion, connections, and influence that enabled Paul to plant a church in Philippi. After she and her household were baptized, Lydia immediately opened her home to Paul and his companions. Over time, Lydia’s home became the center of the church in Philippi. The early church met in people’s homes, around tables not unlike the table we gather around today, set with bread and wine. It was Lydia’s gift of hospitality – the meal and prayers and fellowship shared around her table – that sheltered and nourished that early community of Christians. This is the same church that Paul is writing to in his letter to the Philippians – the first of many churches that sprung up throughout Greece and the Roman heartland and beyond into western Europe.

This story is an example of what we Methodists call prevenient grace – the grace that goes before us. God may ask us to change direction, but we are assured God is leading the way. Prevenient grace got this church through two years of pandemic and the many, many pivots in direction that the pandemic required. And as we step into a new season of ministry here at Community UMC, and look to God and each other to help us rebuild, a belief in prevenient grace guides us still.

I believe that the Holy Spirit is moving through each of our lives, guiding and preparing us to meet the Lydias in our own futures. We never know who God will lead to the doors of this church and what gifts they will bring to build up the body of Christ. But hear me now: In only a short month of serving among you, I have been overwhelmed by all the new and beautiful people God has been putting directly in our path. Some of these people are visitors looking for a church home, others are people reconnecting to our church family after months and years away, still others are longtime members or leaders in the community who feel called to engage with the church in new and meaningful ways. These people have all offered up gifts and skills and connections that are answers to prayers I have barely begun to articulate.

When we remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, God puts people in our path who are ready to receive our witness and become witnesses of Jesus themselves. This is the lifecycle of discipleship, and it fills us with awe and delight! Our job as a faith community is to be open and hospitable to the surprising people God sends our way. When we dare to say “All are welcome – all means all,” we are not only inviting new people to come and see what we are about; we are also inviting God to do a new thing in us through the gifts and graces that new people bring to our community. And so, we must seriously ask ourselves: To receive new people here at Community UMC, are we ready and willing to change direction if God asks us to? To receive new people here at Community UMC, are we ready and willing to have *our* plans and *our* expectations disrupted? To receive new people here at Community UMC, are we ready and willing to let ourselves be changed by the gifts and resources and ideas that they will bring? Radical hospitality means not only inviting new people to the table, but also giving them a seat at the table. Because the table is not ours, it’s God’s, and every person has a place of honor at God’s table.

The circumstances of change can feel chaotic, but we know God’s will when we feel God’s peace. Both my call to leave my previous church and my call to come here to Community UMC were difficult decisions, but the wrestling with God resolved in a deep sense of peace. And even though I imagine Paul and Timothy grumbled on the way to Greece, deep down they, too, knew the peace that comes from being content to follow Jesus and let God work through whomever God calls.

So friends, may God’s peace dwell richly in each of us and in our fellowship as God works a new thing in our midst. May our hearts remain open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. May we trust God’s sense of direction over our own. And when we take a seat at God’s table together, may we look around and give thanks for the grace of God reflected in every person God has seated with us.

Amen.