

Before we read today's scripture- first, a little background. We left off last week in Chapter 11 with a vision Peter had from God telling him what/who God called clean, he could no longer call profane. This was referencing the fact that Gentiles were seen as unclean by the Jews. In chapter 15 of Acts, the Jerusalem Council convenes in Jerusalem to discuss salvation for gentiles in the church. This discussion isn't just about being welcoming. but about full inclusion for gentiles into the church. Through the arguments of Peter, Barnabus, Paul and James, "the council reaches a united decision that faith in Christ is sufficient for Gentiles' salvation; they aren't required to keep the whole Law, though it's recommended that they observe a few vital Jewish restrictions" (*CEB Study Bible*, p. 249). Therefore, a letter is written from the council stating as much and then sent out to the churches via delegates like Paul. At the beginning of Chapter 16, Paul and Silas reach Lystra where they meet Timothy, and Paul decides he and Silas should recruit Timothy to their mission team. A little reminder that ministry is not a solo endeavor; it does not happen alone. It requires companionship and community. They traveled back to the cities where they had been before informing them of the council's letter concerning the change to gentiles having full inclusion in the church. They then traveled to Galatia "because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in Asia" (16:6b). And when they tried to approach another place in Asia, "the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them" (v. 7). Twice they were kept by the Holy Spirit from traveling to Asia. So, they went to Troas instead

and this is where we enter today's story. Listen for a word from God found in **Acts 16:9-15** but first, let us pray.

I used to think of evangelism in a negative light. I grew up about 30 minutes from PTL with Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. When I thought of evangelism, I'd think of billboard campaigns with clichés and shaming slogans, judgey and intrusive approaches to Christianity, you know- cramming religion down your throat. That's not about the Jesus I serve. No, thank you. A word to the wise- never say never around God! I wanted nothing to do with that kind of evangelism- that is until I had to preach my first sermon ever. It was on the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel- you know the one with the strong verbs- "go, make, baptize and teach" (28:16-20). In order to preach authentically, I really had to reclaim what evangelism meant to me- what I felt God's calling was for me. I soon adopted my church's definition of evangelism as "joyfully sharing the good news of Jesus Christ with the world." Evangelism also had to become something I was not longer embarrassed of- though I knew I would be associated with others who would tell me that because of my gender and my calling that the Bible says otherwise. Yet, God's Spirit was leading, and I chose to follow. What about you? I must admit this journey of sharing the good news of Jesus still leaves me with questions- should I approach this person or share this particular story or comment on such a hard topic as a pastor who may view things differently from that person? But then I'm reminded over and over again that sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is never about me (though I sometimes still fret over it- did I say

the right thing? Should I have said something to that person and in that moment?). It's always about God and whose heart God is opening to listen to God's Word.

Today's biblical story reminds us that our lives and journeys don't always go according to our plans. Any of you ever planned something only to have some of your plans changed along the way? I know for me- I've had to adopt the word "flexibility," as it makes for better health. There are always unexpected, out of our control things that happen in life. It never fails. Paul and his companions' approach to life was through their faith that the Holy Spirit was their guide and would not fail them. It sounds like God had some other places and people in mind than they did. We don't know how they knew they were being forbidden to travel to Asia, but they interpreted God's Spirit to be leading them elsewhere. "As our text opens, once again a story in Acts is shaped by a transformative vision from God" (*Connections*, Gary W. Charles, p. 266). This time Paul is the one who has the vision during the night with a man from Macedonia pleading for Paul and company to come over to Macedonia and help them (v.9). "Immediately" after seeing the vision, Paul, Silas and Timothy prepared to leave for Macedonia, having discerned that God had called them there to proclaim the good news (v. 10) on European soil, particularly in some major cities in Greece.

They traveled northwest across the Aegean Sea to Greece until arriving in Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia and a Roman colony, and they stayed there for a few days. What's strange is that Paul's custom in

every place he visited was to find the synagogue and preach there. Yet, today's story is different. This time on the Sabbath, instead of a synagogue, Paul and friends went outside the city gate to an unlikely location on the very fringes of the city: the banks of the river. They were hoping to find a place of prayer there, as they had some good news to share. And there by the water's edge, they did not find the man in Paul's vision but rather, they found a group of women gathered. Paul and the others did not shrug their shoulders and say, "Oh well. These aren't the people we're looking for to share the good news." No, they sat down and began to talk with the women. One of these women was Lydia. "Despite the fact that a Macedonian man beckons the help of Paul in his vision, it is a foreign woman who first has God open her heart to faith" (Eric Barreto, workingpreacher.org). While the barriers of rich and poor are broken down in the community of God, the divisions between women and men are also broken down. "God's Spirit is not submissive to our feelings. Our biases against others who worship, speak, look, or live different from ourselves, should not be taken as proof of the Spirit's absence or presence (Mitzi J. Smith, workingpreacher.org).

I/we know almost nothing about Lydia but what little I know absolutely intrigues me. Here's what we know: She is a Gentile from Thyatira, and she sells purple cloth. She worships God by the water's edge, and she is head of her household. Notice that Lydia is not associated with a man, and she seems to be in full control of her property. We don't know if she is widowed or not. Neither do we know the size of her household. She is maybe not in the upper class but she more than likely has some wealth due to selling purple cloth, only purchased by royalty and the

wealthy, and by being the head of her household. At that time, the “religious identity of all members of a household was determined or strongly influenced by the head of the household (*Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, Matthew L. Skinner, p. 118).

The location nor Lydia and her household were in their original plan of these missionaries’ journey. It almost didn’t happen- this meeting of these missionaries and this businesswoman. Talk about an amazing detour?! That’s when you know it was a God meeting. Ever had one of those detours- where you walk away and just feel the presence of God was in the detour? “This story surely wouldn’t have happened were it not for inexplicable convergence of human faithfulness and divine guidance” (*Feasting on the Word*, Ronald Cole-Turner, p. 476). By listening to and discerning God’s Spirit, Paul and his companions were able to discover a new and fertile ground for sharing God’s good news. And Lydia also was able to discern the deep workings of the Holy Spirit and how her hunger for something more drew her to river that day- to the place of prayer. Once more in Acts, we’re reminded how God takes the initiative in calling followers to go to whomever and wherever God wills” (*Connections*, Gary W. Charles, p. 267). Lydia ends up being quite the evangelist for the church of Jesus Christ. Yet, I would be willing to bet that some of you have never heard of Lydia before now? And the ones of you who have...may not know that Lydia is credited by many scholars as the first Christian convert from that part of the world. Some also believe that she was one of the founders of the early church. “Like other women in Acts, the women at the river represent the important place of women in the early church-a role that the apostle Paul

acknowledges when he commends several other women in Romans 16” (*Connections*, Marianne Blickenstaff, p. 269).

While disagreements continue among Christians over who is in and who is out- who is called to preach and who isn’t, the Holy Spirit is on the move constantly surprising and transforming women and men to receive, believe and share the good news of Jesus Christ along with their gifts. Believe it or not, the early church may have been the only place in society where equity was experienced between men and women, at least for a while. The gospel of Jesus Christ- the gospel Paul preaches reaches beyond the boundaries of Judaism, gender and social class. Jesus was always crossing boundaries and calls us to do the same, as we share the good news and our gifts. The good news of Jesus is for anyone whose heart is open to the gospel. The question is are we willing to go trust where God’s Spirit leads and to share the good news with whomever God leads us to share it? The questions then become: where is the next metaphorical river God is calling you to? Whom will God have you to meet and share the good news at the rivers’ edge? Remember that we don’t go at it alone nor are we the ones who have the power to open people’s hearts. Lydia became a believer and follower of Jesus not necessarily because of Paul’s preaching **but because the Lord opened her heart to embrace the good news** (v.14b). Whew- the pressure is off! The church has sometimes thought that it brings the gospel to people therefore bringing God to people but actually it is the Holy Spirit who is “drawing us into what the Holy Spirit is doing” (workingpreacher.org, podcast 2019). In other words, we go to people

and places where God is already at work way before we arrive. Yes, women and men are needed to share and model the good news, but it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that people listen and receive it. God is going to be God...so be you and do what God is calling you to do with the gifts God has given you. I know Paul sometimes gets a bad rap when it comes to women in the bible; however, Paul's participates in joining the Holy Spirit in welcoming and including Lydia and her entire household to receive the salvation of Jesus Christ. And then Lydia immediately offers her gift of hospitality- a place to stay- to Paul and his fellow sojourners. It is often in the most unexpected places and people and through the most amazing detours where hearts are opened by God to the good news of Jesus Christ. Shall we trust God's Spirit to gather us at the river- gather with the saints at the river- that flows by the throne of God? Amen.