

Easter 06 C 2022
May 22, 2022 :: Acts 16:9-15
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“Recommenders of Christ.”

It’s only during the Season of Easter that we get to hear readings from the Acts of the Apostles. I think that’s the case because so many of the stories in Acts, talk about what was going on in the Christian community in the years immediately following the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, these stories provide us with snapshots of what church life was like, *while the empty tomb was still a fairly fresh memory.*

Our reading from Acts this morning, focuses on the twists and turns of fate — or maybe it was simply God’s will — whatever it was, led St. Paul to the city of Philippi; and then to a riverside prayer meeting; and finally to the home of a woman named Lydia, who seems to have been the leader of the very first Christian church in Europe.

As the gospel story opens, Paul is a very frustrated man. By all accounts, his *first* missionary journey had gone well. From his home base in Damascus, he went into the eastern part of Asia

Minor — in what we now call Turkey — with his partner Barnabas, who was a gifted preacher, and a trusted friend.

But his second missionary journey did not begin so well. First of all, he and Barnabas had a big argument over Mark. Mark had been with Paul and Barnabas part of the way on their first missionary journey; but when Mark got homesick, he abandoned the mission to return home. Now, however, Mark wanted to go on this second missionary journey. But Paul wouldn't hear of it. However, Barnabas insisted they allow Mark to join them. But Paul said "No way!" Finally, Paul and Barnabas parted company, and each went on separate missionary journeys — Barnabas went with Mark; but Paul picked up a new partner, a man named Silas.

So, Paul's second missionary journey gets off to a rocky start. But it doesn't take long to realize that things won't get better very quickly. They were traveling to the *western* part of Asia Minor this time, however Paul and Silas just couldn't seem to get anything going once they were there. The text explains that "they had been *forbidden* by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 16:6) at one point, and *prevented* by the "spirit of Jesus" (Acts 16:7) at another, from getting anything going.

But then things begin to look up. As our reading describes, Paul had a vision. And in that vision, God showed him a “man of Macedonia” — which is to say, a Greek — who was pleading with him to come across the sea and bring the gospel to that land. In other words, it was a vision that told Paul to go to a place he had never thought of, and begin a ministry which had never crossed his mind.

So Paul and Silas went to Philippi, a city named after the father of Alexander the Great. And on the sabbath, they went looking for the Jews — that is, they sought out people with whom they were familiar, hoping to start a conversation. Since the Jewish community in Philippi was so small, they had no synagogue, and, in good weather, they met under some trees by a river.

Now, you may have noticed that our text described the meeting as taking place “outside the gate.” Many towns of that day had laws prohibiting the practice of foreign religions within the city, because the town leaders were afraid of offending their local gods. So, people like the Jews had to go outside the city gates to

pray. And so, it was there that Paul and Silas found them; well, at least they found some Jewish *women*.

Now, it may mean nothing, but it's interesting that it was a *man* who appeared in the vision that led Paul and Silas to Philippi, but our reading only mentions *women* as having gathered in that place to pray. Were the men someplace else? Or, were they also present, but uninterested in hearing anything new? We just don't know; but in any event, Paul and Silas sat down and shared the Gospel.

Our text records what happens next:

“A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

So, what does this passage tell us about this “woman named Lydia”? Well, that we even know her name, tells us that she was probably a prominent member of the early Christian community.

That she was described as “a worshiper of God” suggests that she was not Jewish, though her presence with the local Jewish community indicates that she was interested in their religion. And that tells us that she was interested in a faith which had its focus on God, community, and morality — rather than a religion (like so many that were popular in those days) which mixed together the themes of war, fertility, prosperity, and revenge. In other words, she was a prime candidate to hear what Paul and Silas had to say.

You know, things aren’t so different today. We are surrounded by people who are spiritually starved, and ready to hear the Good News of the Gospel. There are (if you will) Lydias all around us: People who are looking for something more in their lives; People who are anxious and eager to be a part of something real and honest; People who need to know what God in Christ has done for them. And so, the real question is, “Do *we* hear the voice of God, calling us to bring them the Good News?” And, “Do we share the vision that brought Paul and Silas to Philippi?”

Look at what the text says next:

“The Lord opened her heart” — that is,
Lydia’s heart — “to listen.”

Too often we forget that it’s *God* who brings people to faith; not us. We are simply the voices who — in our conversations with those around us — who bring the message of God’s redeeming love for the world. We’re merely the messengers; God does the heavy lifting. However, the role we play is still vitally important.

“And why is that?” you may wonder. Well, a few years ago, Time magazine reported that “word on the street,” “buzz,” and “word of mouth,” are the most powerful marketing tools around. When it comes to choosing brands, consumers say they’re influenced by *people*, not by ads. Here are the actual numbers: 56% of those polled reported trying a new product because of the recommendations of family or friends; only 10% because of TV ads, 9% because of newspaper ads, and 6% because of radio ads. In other words, our shared recommendations, our witness, *our conversations*, carry more weight than probably anything else you can think of. And what our reading from Acts reminds us is that we — just like Paul and Silas — that we are called to be “recommenders of Christ” to those around us.

Lydia responded to the Gospel. And she shared it with her family, and soon she and her entire household were baptized. We don't know how long that process took, but notice how her conversation with Paul and Silas had a ripple effect: first Lydia; and then her household — those nearest and dearest to her. And from that inauspicious beginning there formed a church; the church to whom St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians is written.

My friends, God calls us to be a part of his outreach mission. God calls us to share our stories — to become “recommenders of Christ” — so that, through us, God can bring about faith and hope in the lives of more and more people. And we are called to be like Lydia: to be people who hear the Good News, and then to become people who share the Good News in all that we say and do.

Amen.