

“Traveling Mercies”

The Rev. Drew Willard
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Acts 16:9-15

John 14:23-29

*Once she and her household were baptized, she urged,
“Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord,
come and stay in my house.” And she persuaded us.*

Acts 16:15

Let us pray... O God,

When the journey is long and uncertain,
send us the help we need to keep going.

We thank you for the grace we have received on our personal journeys
and we thank you for the help we shall surely receive for the road ahead.

Amen

Passages from Acts 16 are part of the lectionary readings this Sunday and next,
so I expect this will become a very familiar text

because these events were mentioned in my first sermon last month.

In that sermon, I talked about how the apostles Paul and Silas were imprisoned
and happened to convert their jailer.

This time, I want to focus on events relating to Lydia...

The Holy Spirit whom Jesus promised his disciples would come to them
as Counselor, is very active in events just prior to this story.

The Holy Spirit had previously instructed the Apostle Paul not to go into “Asia” –
but ‘Asia’ back then was a province of the eastern region of the Roman Empire.

Having the vantage point of history, it would seem that “Asia” could also mean
the Asian continent, where early Christianity would have met
strong competition from the mature religious traditions
of Hinduism and Buddhism.

So, the Holy Spirit wisely steered the apostles away from
having to confront that challenge so early in the formation of the Church.

As they proceeded to move on to the next town,
the Holy Spirit blocked their way again and sent Paul on a circuitous route
as if to stall for time somehow...

Then, Paul received new guidance through a dream
as to what direction his missionary efforts should now take.

In that vision, he saw a man from Macedonia call to him,
inviting him to come there to help.

The province of Macedonia is in what is now northern Greece
and this was the entry point to the western region of the Roman Empire.

So, basically Paul was being told to “go west, young man” to establish Europe
as the new home for the early Church.

Willard, p.2

Paul, Silas, and their companions journeyed there

and entered the city of Phillipi where they stayed for a few days –

We are not told where but apparently their stay was uneventful.

On the Sabbath day, they went to a riverside park set aside for public devotions;

There they found a group of Gentile women – non-Jewish women,
who had gathered to worship the God of the Jewish people.

The apostles – being Jewish themselves, must have been welcomed by these women
and invited to participate in worship with them and

certainly this occasion led to discussions about God and Christ.

Among these women was Lydia, who was so impressed by what Paul

and his fellow missionaries had to say that she was baptized,
probably right there at the river.

Her household – which could have been both family and servants,

and very likely present with her for worship, were baptized along with her.

Lydia then invited Paul and all his companions to stay at her home.

We are told that Lydia was from Thyatira –

which is located back in the province of ‘Asia’, or present day Turkey,
about a hundred miles from Phillipi.

She was a dealer of purple cloth – and the color purple in ancient times

was a symbol of royalty, so this implied she was wealthy.

Owning her own house and being a successful business owner,

meant that Lydia was unusually fortunate as a woman living at such a time
and in such a traditional culture that generally favored male privilege.

No husband or male relative was mentioned, which suggests that she was widowed –
or else she made out very well from the divorce.

Inviting these men to her home – who were otherwise strangers,

demonstrates that Lydia was a generous and extraordinary person

who knew her own mind and didn’t care what others thought of her.

She was way ahead of her time, by a couple millennia!

Just to remind you about the incident in which Paul and Silas were jailed,
it was for a trumped up charge of disturbing the peace.

While they were chained and in prison, they sang hymns and prayed to God

far into the night – demonstrating a discipline of devotion

that they must have regularly practiced

even in such stressful circumstances.

So, we get a glimpse of the community-creating activities

that the early apostles did on their mission ventures.

Certainly, this was there custom during their stay with Lydia –

which might help explain why they were so readily welcomed back
after their release from prison.

Willard, p.3

Over and over again we can see the dynamics at work for Jesus' followers as they carried the Good News into the wider world.

The hospitality of Roman citizens as people of means who were also householders, was essential for the Christian movement to find roots, grow, and bear fruit.

Such hospitality is part of what is called 'traveling mercies',

kindnesses along the way that those early missionaries relied upon.

Another word for 'traveling mercies' is 'grace'...

In this text we have had a glimpse of the dynamics of

1st Century Christian hospitality and fellowship as the Church ventured out from the Middle East to find a new home in Europe.

In the years to come, this would change as Christianity became accepted as the state religion of the Roman Empire.

Unfortunately, that meant that those original values of hospitality and generosity which characterized early Christian community, became less of a priority to the larger, popular culture.

Most Roman citizens went from being nominal pagans to become nominal Christians.

In response to this, a monastic tradition arose around

Christians who wanted to live according to Christ's example as monks.

These communities took the form of monasteries which assumed the role of welcoming Christian travelers.

Christ Through The Centuries , Pelikan pp. 113-114

These days we Christians generally stay at a Ramada Inn or a Hilton Hotel though there are retreat centers even in this area.

There have also been occasions when some of you have taken in Christian wayfarers for some project we have done as a congregation – just like Lydia of long ago.

By the way, the text implies that Lydia herself was on a journey of faith which might explain why the Holy Spirit sent Paul and his fellow travelers on a roundabout course to arrive at Phillipi.

They were right on time to meet Lydia – to be that grace for her just she had been for them.

It is important to remember how the Christian church began and how those lessons might be reapplied.

When have you made a long trip when you were at the mercy of the road?

When did you benefit from the hospitality of family & friends – or even strangers?

Willard, p.4

There are different kinds of journeys we can make:

Sometimes we go as tourists – or ‘cruisers’

just to see the world, to experience the fun of discovery.

Sometimes we are pilgrims – literally to visit a sacred place

like an historic landmark, a shrine, or a place of personal significance.

Sometimes we are on a mission – like a business trip, or like the apostles

who intentionally went out to share the love of God,

or to care for a loved one, or to pay last respects.

Sometimes we are on an adventure –

where you find yourself on a path not of your choosing and

you have to find your way back home.

Sometimes our journey is not so much geographical as it is spiritual –

the journey from the head to the heart.

Just remember that no matter where you are on that journey

you are welcome here and that the Holy Spirit goes along

to guide you with grace on the way to glory.

Amen

Our lesson from Acts 16:9-15 provides a snapshot for how Christian missionaries initially established communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire...

- ⁹ A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night.
He stood urging Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!”
- ¹⁰ Immediately after he saw the vision,
we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia,
concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.
- ¹¹ We sailed from Troas [Tro'-az] straight for Samothrace
and came to Neapolis [Nee-ah'-po-lis] the following day.
- ¹² From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia's first district
and a Roman colony.
We stayed in that city several days.
- ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank,
where we thought there might be a place for prayer.
We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered.
- ¹⁴ One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper
from the city of Thyatira [Thi-a-teer'-a], a dealer in purple cloth.
As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message.
- ¹⁵ Once she and her household were baptized, she urged,
“Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord,
come and stay in my house.” And she persuaded us.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 14:23-29

²³ Jesus answered him,

“If [someone] loves me, [they] will keep my word,
and my [Abba] Father will love [them], and we will come to [them]
and make our home with [them].

²⁴ [Those] who [do] not love me [do] not keep my words;
and the word which you hear is not mine but the [Abba’s] who sent me.

²⁵ “These things I have spoken to you,
while I am still with you.

²⁶ But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name,
[...]will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance
all that I have said to you.

²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you;
not as the world gives do I give to you.

Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

²⁸ You heard me say to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’

If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I go to the [Abba] Father;
for the [Abba] is greater than I.

²⁹ And now I have told you before it takes place,
so that when it does take place, you may believe.”