

“A Simple Act of Hospitality”

There are a number of things we learn from today’s First Lesson about the church, its ministry, and those who are engaged in it. It closes with a simple act of hospitality, but that act, and what led up to it, redirected the course of the Gospel. So the first thing we learn is that we should never take for granted what will or will not have Gospel impact.

The *personae dramatis* in this drama are: St. Paul (clearly a central figure in the entire the Book of Acts); an unnamed man from Macedonia (the country north of Greece and into what today is Turkey, not the city where I reside just north and west of here); “We” — and we will have to figure out to whom that refers; a woman named Lydia (not “Lydia the Tattooed Lady” that Groucho Marx sang about in the movie, “At the Circus”) of whom we are told three things — She was ***“a worshiper of God,”*** ***“[S]he was from the city of Thyatira”*** and She was ***“a dealer in purple cloth,”*** all of which are important to this drama.

The action begins long before this pericope. Paul and Silas had been wanting to get to the peninsula of Greece and Macedonia for some time. But every time they thought the setting and timing were right to go, something else came up. That “something else” was the Spirit of God denying them access to the north and west.

Such barriers, that seem to arise for no reason, do in fact have a reason: they serve to remind us that God is in charge of the mission, that the church often searches for God’s calling in mistaken directions and aborted attempts, and that God’s Spirit often speaks through frustrating and difficult discernment. Now suddenly, again for no apparent reason, this vision comes to Paul featuring ***“a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”***

Last Sunday I tried to give you a rudimentary experience of visioning. I should hasten on to say that visions are not dreams. Dreams are, essentially, your brain trying to sort out something that logic and

experience cannot seem to work out. Your left brain is a marvelous instrument, capable of all kinds of logic, numbers, reflection. Your right brain is imaginative, creative, fun-loving. Sometimes they don't seem to talk to one another or, as comedian Lewis Black says, sometimes the two halves of your brain can only come up with this: *"It's dark in here."* Dreams are your brain's subconscious working out what you consciously cannot. Which may explain why we remember very few dreams, even though we dream every night; and also why some dreams we do remember remain with us in full vibrancy and impact.

Visions are something else. They are Spirit-given, Spirit-directed processes that lift us into a different spiritual plane than where we normally reside. Visions may be of things, events, people, the past, and/or the future. We tend to think that visions were prominent in Biblical times, but in the New Testament (with the exception of the Book of Revelation, which is in its entirety a vision) the word ὄραμα (horama) occurs only in seven accounts, all seven of them in the Book of Acts. This is another thing we learn here: the Spirit leads the Church in its mission and ministry and does so in unconventional ways.

I suspect (and I suspect because I do not know) that one cannot seek out or invite in a vision. Visions are not taken, they are given. Back in the 80's, the Church Growth movement loved to quote from Proverbs 29:18: ***"Where there is no vision the people perish."*** So pastors and other leaders were encouraged to have visions. It turns out, they were not speaking about visions at all, but rather about having a clear understanding of who you are and where you want to go as a congregation. That may make a good deal of sense, but it is not vision, and it may not be Spirit-led. I can imagine a plausible future for St. Thomas Lutheran Church, and it can include some grand plans — but if it all comes solely from my imagination, what good would it be?

Notice that Paul and Silas kept moving, even if God was throwing obstacles in their path. They understood this was God directing the action. They remained faithful to being about the business to which they

had been called.

Now what do we know about this man from Macedonia? Nothing. We have no idea who he was, where he was, what he was doing, other than the words ascribed by Luke to him: ***“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”*** What kind of help? We don’t know. Help doing what? We are not told. Which makes it rather difficult to plan out the ministry goals and strategically map out how to implement them. What it demands of Paul and Silas is that they recognize this as the voice of God and they respond to it that way.

Now, who are the “we” in this passage? In the Book of Acts, around what we now number as chapter 16, Luke begins to write from the first person plural instead of the third person. Up to that point, with the exception of quotes from the mouths of individuals, it had been “he” and “they” in the narrative. We have to conclude that Luke joined up with Paul and Silas for this part of the journey [we do know that Luke was with Paul at some point in Paul’s ministry, because in Colossians, 1 Timothy and Philemon, Paul writes that Luke is with him]. So this is not the witness of others to these events; this is Luke’s own eyewitness testimony to these goings-on.

Does that validate the story for you? Perhaps only the Spirit can do that, as well. For me, it’s kind of an added bonus that Luke is not just trusting the accounts he hears from others; he has his own story to tell.

As do you and I. One of the many things we need to learn from this account has to do with our own spiritual journey and ministry. Like the many characters in this account (and many similar accounts in the Bible), we need to be attentive to God’s direction. Will God come to you in a vision? I don’t know. One of the things we need to keep in mind about God is that we cannot control Him. We often act as if we can — or more often act as if we can ignore Him.

Neither is true, and neither is healthy [some of you recall Pastor Tauscher; when I would golf with him, if one of the foursome hit a good shot, he would quote the commentator on CBS golf coverage and

proclaimed that shot, “helpful” — it is not “helpful” to try to control or ignore God].

So I ask you to turn to Lydia for an example. First, here’s what we know of her (or better, what we can glean from what we know of her): She was quite well-to-do. As a **“dealer in purple cloth,”** she would have been one who dealt with a very rare commodity affordable only to the wealthy. She apparently was also the head of her household (I say that because no husband is mentioned). This put her in a position of leadership. She is **“a worshiper of God,”** our passage tells us, and she has gathered with a number of other pious women at a place beside the river, where the women meet for prayer. The text does not say to what god the women are praying. The Romans had lots of gods, and the devotion of these women might have been to any one of those pagan deities.

On the other hand, perhaps Lydia had already heard of Christ and was praying to the Father. She had not yet, however, become a member of the church. But God opened Lydia's heart to give heed to what Paul was saying, and she and her household joined the Christian community by being baptized by Paul. The Christian faith is a communal affair; it involves incorporation into a body of believers. And Lydia joins that body when she is baptized, just as we join it at our baptisms.

In joining, she extends a simple act of hospitality. She says, **“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.”** This is not a big deal; and this, it turns out, is a huge deal. Lydia provides the home base from which will launch the church’s outreach to Greece, and then across the Mediterranean basin. Lydia could make this offer, because she had the financial resources to welcome these strangers into her home.

Could it have happened another way? Obviously. But God brought Lydia into the picture for a reason. She did not offer to underwrite the mission journeys. She did not buy tons of Bible scrolls for them to pass out among the various cities to which they would venture. She basically said, **“Guys, why don’t you stay at my house.”** Because she said it, God

blessed it, and great things ensued.

In your bulletin there is an insert of very colorful paper on which I have left space for you to think about how you might emulate Lydia. I am asking you to think about four things:

- 1) One person to whom I could extend hospitality is . . . (an invitation to your home, to lunch, to church).
- 2) What I need to do to “prevail on” this person is . . . (notice Luke tells us Lydia prevailed on them: she wouldn’t take no for an answer)
- 3) My prayer from this moment will be . . . (for what will you need God’s guidance, direction, assistance)
- 4) I will need the help of . . . (who are some people you can turn to for help in getting this done?)

In reality, I am asking you to go beyond just thinking about these things, but actually to approach the person you have identified, and make that simple act of hospitality. Will it change the world? I don’t know, but then you never do know where the Spirit is involved. I am guessing it will change you, as you give yourself over to letting God do something through you. I am rather certain it will change the person you identify, for you know what it’s like to have someone act of your behalf, especially without you requesting it.

More often than not, it is the simple act, not the grand gesture, that provides impetus. Most of us would like to imagine what we could do with the winnings from the Powerball — what grand gestures we could make to underwrite ministries, change people’s lives, set the world on fire. There are myriad voices beckoning us to think great things, do great deeds for God. I am suggesting that it will be in the simple, the small, the seemingly insignificant that we see the hand of God at work. Can God make that into a grand thing? If God so desires; of course. But let’s get out of the business of trying to control God, or think for God, and certainly let’s stop trying to ignore God.

Let God take control. Position yourself to be used by God to touch one

life . . . that will be enough for this week. To paraphrase Lydia, let this become your mantra: *“If you have judged me to be faithful, Lord, use me this day as You choose.”*

“Useful.”

Amen.