

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025

## Acts 16:9-15 “Detour Ahead”

Before we dive into this morning’s scripture I need to tell you a tale of two cities. The first city is Eugene, Oregon. Eugene is in the southern Willamette Valley on the rainy west side of the state. It’s mostly known for the University of Oregon (go Ducks!) and a little college on the edge of the U of O campus that was once called Northwest Christian College, which is my alma mater. People often call it “Track Town USA” because the university has a top-notch track and field program, and Hayward Field hosts many national and international track meets. In fact, Eugene is the birthplace of Nike shoes. Eugene’s Saturday Market is among the nation’s best open-air markets and the city is often ranked high as one of the greenest cities in the nation even before it was cool to be green. David Ogden-Stiers, who played Charles Emmerson Winchester III in the MASH television series is from Eugene as is Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. His niece, Kerry, is a Disciples of Christ minister by the way. She went to NCC too. The Grateful Dead played their famous Sunshine Daydream concert in the summer of 1972 12 miles west of Eugene in a little town called Veneta, which is my hometown. The Hult Center for the Performing Arts is known as one of the best venues for music, dance and theater performances. Eugene is known nationally for Square One Villages, a program that helps homeless folks by giving them a place to live and has a great track record of helping people get sober, find jobs, and move into permanent housing. Rev. Dan Bryant, a retired Disciples of Christ minister, is the founder of this program. He also went to NCC. Eugene consistently votes blue in most elections. The polite way of describing Eugene would be “artsy.” The not-so-polite term would be “hippie.” So do you have a good picture in your mind of what Eugene is all about? Can you see the tie-dye t-shirts and Birkenstock sandals? Can you smell the pachouli oil?

The second city I want you to consider is Springfield, Oregon. Here’s Wikipedia’s description of Springfield –

“Historically, Springfield was a major hub for the timber and logging industry in the Pacific Northwest, which played a central role in the region's economy throughout the 20th century. The Weyerhaeuser Paper Company operated large facilities there, and the town retains a strong working-class and industrial character.” That’s about the best summary of Springfield that I’ve ever read. I have a few other things to add though. Springfield is famous for its legendary knife and gun shows. The McKenzie river has some of the best trout fishing in the state. It is the gateway to the Cascade mountain range where you can see the snow-covered peaks of the Three Sisters on the occasional clear, sunny days. The Gateway Shopping Mall is one of the largest malls in the Willamette Valley, but the biggest store in the building is not Nordstroms or Abercrombie and Fitch. No. There are some great stores there and great restaurants too including – Marshall’s and Original Roadhouse Steak and BBQ. But the main feature? Cabella’s Outfitters. If your desire is to kill an animal in the wild on your own and take it home for dinner, this is the place to go. Looking for camouflage clothing, flannel shirts and top-quality outdoor gear? Need a good compound bow or a high-end scope for your hunting rifle? People travel for hundreds of miles to shop here. A lot of veterans live here too. Springfield’s Veterans Day parade is the biggest and best west of the Cascades. I imagine their Memorial Day services are top-notch too. They consistently vote red in most elections. The polite term to describe Springfield would be “working class” or “country.” The not so polite term would be, “redneck.” So do you have a good picture in your mind of what Springfield is all about? Can you see and hear the flags fluttering in the breeze? Can you smell the combination of paper mill, gunpowder and backyard barbeque grills?

Want to know the distance between these two cities? The distance between the west and east banks of the Willamette River. There are three bridges that allow passage from one city to the other. They are sometimes referred to as “sister cities,” which I suppose is true. Stepsisters maybe, but yeah, sisters. Though geographically close, they are worlds apart culturally. One sister wears a flower dress made of all natural fibers and a colorful boho hat. The other wears Wrangler jeans

and a cowboy hat. And so it is with the two locations that Luke mentions in our scripture this morning.

Some would say that Paul's encounter with Lydia and this group of praying women on the outskirts of Philippi happened unintentionally. Why? Because Paul's original travel plans were detoured and he and his team found themselves in Philippi. Philippi was established as a retirement community for soldiers who fought in the Roman civil war that broke out after Julius Caesar was assassinated. These veterans were given this land to occupy. These soldiers and their descendants were hard core patriots. They were "more Roman than Rome." They had faith in the rule of Roman law and saw the world in strict binaries. You're either in or out. You're either a citizen or not a citizen. You're either part of your social class or you're not. You follow the rules. Men do men things and women do woman things. Everything has a proper time and place. That was Philippi. Sounds a little like Springfield doesn't it?

Lydia, on the other hand was not from Philippi. Luke describes her as a "dealer in purple cloth" from Thyatira. Thyatira was an "artsy" merchant city in what is now western Turkey. It was populated by wool-workers, linen-workers, makers of outer garments, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers and bronze-smiths. It was a cultural Mecca that sounds kind of like Eugene minus the University of Oregon. I imagine that in Philippi, Lydia stuck out like a blueberry in a bowl of tomato soup. But there she was, a well-dressed Gentile woman on the shores of a river near the gates of Philippi worshipping and praying with a group of women.

But hey, at least she was a Gentile. That's about the only way she fits in with the Philippians. But even then, she wasn't like other Gentiles, because Luke labels her a "God worshipper." We're not sure how she came to know God, but there she was on the Sabbath worshipping. Paul approached the women whose "hearts had been opened up by God so they could receive his teaching." Paul must have said something that clicked because Lydia, who had already found a connection with God,

came to faith and was baptized. And not just her, but her whole household. Then Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. This was the beginning of a very important collaboration. So what was Paul thinking when he thought he could be in partnership with someone like Lydia? What was Lydia thinking when she thought she could partner up with someone like Paul? I guess it takes all kinds to establish those sorts of alliances and as we all know, alliances, partnerships, and collaborations are vital to doing good ministry.

Remember a few weeks ago when I told you that my New Testament professor said that Acts should be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit?” Every week we’ve been learning about the impact that Peter and Paul had as they brought the good news of Jesus to the Gentiles. But it’s not really about Peter or Paul is it? It’s about the Holy Spirit working *through* them. Here in this week’s text, we see how important community is to the overall ministry that’s taking place. This isn’t Paul’s ministry, it’s God’s ministry and it can’t happen apart from the *community*. Paul and his team are continually inviting people like Lydia to take part in the gospel story. And next week we’ll see how Lydia comes in clutch when Paul and Silas are thrown in jail. Again, collaborations and partnerships are vital to doing good ministry.

Speaking of collaborations and partnerships, let’s talk about how they have helped in our ministry here at First Christian Church in Chico. What kind of ties have we built? What ministries have we had the privilege of sharing with others? I’m going to work backwards because I wasn’t here when many of these collaborations took place and I’m sure I’ll miss some. There’s the collaboration we have with Scout Troop 2. They needed a home base, and we happen to have a scout leader in our church. Because of this, we were able to accomplish two things that have been on our church “wish list” for decades. We have acoustic panels in our fellowship hall that allow us to hear each other speak across a table in a crowded room. We will also have a community garden which is under construction outside that door. Terrie Thomas proposed that idea 12 years ago. Why is this happening? Because one of our

members knew someone in need and formed a partnership. In a similar manner, one of our members took a little detour and met someone who had recently started a foster care resource ministry called “The Forgotten Initiative.” They said, “One of these days we hope to find a place that has a free room that we can use for a boutique for foster families.” Not only did we have a room, we had folks who were excited and willing to volunteer their time to get that room ready and staff this boutique.

In 2015, the newly-formed Chico Housing Action Team was reaching out to churches to see if they’d be willing to open their doors for a week in the winter to give people a warm place to stay when it got cold and rainy. Some of our folks said, “We’ve done this before, and it led to the formation of the Torres Shelter. We can do this again.” Thus, Safe Space Winter Shelter was born. Why? Because our folks knew some people from CHAT and said, “Let’s collaborate.” On the last day of Safe Space a few years ago, two ministers were cleaning up our kitchen and thought, “What if we did more stuff like this together?” That was the beginnings of the collaboration and partnership that we now have with First Baptist Church. Thirteen years ago, someone from our church heard that a small Hispanic congregation was looking for a place to worship. We said, “Sure, that could work!” Now we have a good partnership with Iglesia de Cristo Agua Viva. Last night St. Elias Syrian Orthodox church had a beautiful wedding celebration in K-Hall, and has used our facility for various services over the years. Why? Because someone just happened to someone. A detour happened where nobody really knew where the road would lead, but it led to a collaboration where ministry could take place.

Some may call these little detours “chance encounters,” but I don’t think that’s the case, because they have all resulted in collaborations and partnerships with agencies like Stonewall Alliance, Chico Creek Dance, Inspire School for Arts and Science, Chico Ballet, Chico Children’s Choir, Shalom Free Clinic, Everhart Village, Peg Taylor Center, Lucien Manor, Jarvis Gardens, the Jesus Center, Crisis Care Advocacy and Triage, Hunger Trolley, Chico Area Interfaith Council, and countless

other partnerships that many of us have forgotten in our congregation's 140 year history.

In my Bible, the passage Bob read is labeled, "The Conversion of Lydia." I have another label – Let's call it, "Plan Ahead, Be Flexible." Or "Detour Ahead." Think about how many times we imagined we knew our path of ministry, and then all of a sudden we've got a big ol' orange and black "Detour" sign in front of us. Now, we *could* have ignored those signs and found ourselves in all sorts of trouble, but instead we chose to follow that sign and discovered ministry opportunities that weren't even on the map! Maybe you can be "that person" who encounters someone along the road like Lydia who ends up being a vital partner in the life and ministry of our church.