

May 22nd, 2022

Acts 16:9-15 “It Takes All Kinds”

Welcome to week six of our Eastertide celebration. One more Sunday after this to go and we’ll be in Wildwood Park for our Pentecost celebration! Today is also week eleven of studying a passage of scripture from a book that Luke wrote. Last week we were with the Apostle Peter when he learned, “God has shown me that I should not call *anyone* profane or unclean.” As I said last week, this was a *big* turning point in Luke’s writings. We’ve seen little snippets of how inclusive God can be, but last week we witnessed the birth of “all means all.” This week, we’re going to leave Peter behind and jump ahead five chapters to the Apostle Paul. We met Paul a few weeks ago. He used to be “Saul the persecutor of Christians,” but after he had an encounter with the risen Christ he became “Paul, the apostle to the gentiles in the northern territories of the Roman Empire.”

I suppose one way we can look at Acts is that the first part of the book focuses on Peter’s ministry and then sets us up for this “all Gentiles are welcome” lesson. The rest of the book focuses on Paul carrying this lesson out in practical terms. For me it seems like Peter’s story is all about exploring and discovery and learning the ins and outs of ministry. Chapter 13 is where Paul’s story as an active apostle starts. And oh, my goodness is his story full of *drama*. He’s having feuds with other apostles including Peter. He can’t seem to get along with his traveling companions and apprentices. He gets shipwrecked, gets bitten by snakes, starts riots, spends a *lot* of time in jail and just can’t seem to stay out of trouble. There are times when you just want to cringe at some of the things he says and does, but then you realize that he is out there getting stuff done and showing people that God’s tent is big enough for *everyone*. The second part of Acts shows us that the Holy Spirit can move even the most unlikely people to show the world what the Reign of God is all about.

Speaking of unlikely people, this week’s story is about Paul’s encounter with Lydia. As I’ve been saying all along, Acts, like many books in the Bible, was written for ancient middle eastern people. We as 21st century Americans don’t always get what’s going on which means we often don’t understand the impact of what seems like a pretty simple story. The story of Lydia is like

that. At face value it looks like Paul and his companions were acting on a vision Paul had to go to Macedonia to preach. While they were in Philippi, they stepped out of the city gates on the Sabbath to see if there were any prayer meetings going on. Paul saw Lydia and a group of women by the river worshipping, so he shared a message that apparently wasn't important enough for Luke to go into details about. But then Lydia and her entire household were baptized and she invited Paul's group to stay at her home.

Kind of boring, isn't it? Until you dig in and look at the situation more closely. First of all, this story takes place in Philippi. Okay, so what? Philippi was established as a retirement community for soldiers who fought in the Roman civil war that broke out after Julius Caesar was assassinated. This is when the Roman Republic went from being a constitutional republic to an autocratic empire. These soldiers were on the winning side of the battle and after the Roman dictators established the Pax Romana, those veterans were given this land to occupy. These soldiers and their descendants were hard core. They were "more Roman than Rome." If you wanted to make a comparison to modern times, they would be the guys who get up at the crack of dawn to run their flag up the flagpole and shoot a death glare to anyone at a football game who didn't stand up and remove their hat during the National Anthem. They had faith in the rule of Roman law and they had strict ways of doing things. They saw everything in 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 women things. Everything has a proper time and place. That was Philippi. Do you have a good image in your mind of what this place might have been like? Do you have a 21st century American equivalent that you can imagine? Because I lived in Virginia for sixteen years, I think of Norfolk or Virginia Beach. That's where a lot of sailors and Marines go to retire. As far as California is concerned, Google tells me that San Diego has the highest percentage of veterans in this state. I've never been there so I wouldn't know. So long as you have an image of what Philippi might have been like in your mind, I'm ready to move on.

Okay, so let's meet Lydia. Lydia is identified as a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira. Thyatira was an "artsy" city in what is now western Turkey. It was a merchant city. It was populated by wool-workers, linen-

workers, makers of outer garments, dyers, leather-workers, tanners, potters, bakers and bronze-smiths. Need some help trying to visualize what a modern-day equivalency would be in our time and place? I was thinking maybe Santa Cruz or downtown Nevada City. A place that has lot of shops where you can buy things that are out of the ordinary. Luxury goods. Items that you'd see on display at bazaars and traveling art shows. Purple dye, which is what Lydia dealt in, was made from the secretions of sea snails. It took tens of thousands of these snails and a great deal of labor to make this dye. The only people who could afford purple clothes were the wealthy. Lydia was a skilled entrepreneur who, in order to maintain her business, had to know how to build relationships and manage clients. She was a public figure. She was part of the merchant class which means she was quite wealthy. And here she was in Philippi where she stood out like a blueberry in a bowl of tomato soup.

I suppose the only thing she had going for her was that she was a Gentile. That's about the only way anyone could say that she fit in with the Philippians. But even then, she wasn't like other Gentiles, because Luke labels her a "God worshipper" who was on the shores of a river outside the city that was known as a place of prayer. She was there on the Sabbath too which wasn't what anyone would expect! Paul went over to the women whose "hearts had been opened up by God" so they could receive his teaching. He must have said something that clicked because this woman, who had already found a connection with God, was baptized. And not just her, but her whole household, which was yet another example of how much she didn't fit in. It doesn't go into detail about who was in her "household" and I'm not going to speculate, but if she were indeed the head of her household, that was just another reason for the average citizen of Philippi to think she was a weirdo. Remember what I said last week – Ministry isn't about bringing God to the people, it's going where God already is and shining a light. That's what happened here. Then Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. Later, we'll see how much her hospitality meant when Paul started stirring up trouble. But that's next week's lesson. Let's stay focused on what's going on here.

In the early days of the church, whenever someone decided to follow Jesus, they would make a confession of faith that included the phrase, "Jesus is

Lord.” In the book of Philippians, which is a letter Paul wrote to the church that was founded in this city, he quoted part of a song that became popular in the church. Bible scholars call it, “The Christ Hymn” and you can find it in the first eleven verses of Philippians 2. The last line of the hymn is, “At the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” In this time and place, *average* Roman citizens were expected to confess that “*Caesar* is Lord.” Philippi was populated by retired Roman soldiers who made an oath to give their lives for the glory of Caesar. It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to guess how they must have felt about people who confessed that “*Jesus* is Lord.”

And here’s Lydia, who sticks out like a sore thumb, becoming a partner in ministry with Paul who used to persecute Christians who dared to say, “*Jesus* is Lord.” What was Paul thinking when he thought he could partner 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 kinds of alliances. In our study of Acts, we’ve been asking, “Who is this story about?” Every week we say, “This story isn’t about Steven or Peter or Paul or whoever, it’s about the Holy Spirit working *through* these people.” Here in this chapter, we see how important community is to the overall ministry that’s taking place there. This isn’t Paul’s ministry. This isn’t Timothy or Silas’ ministry. It’s God’s ministry but it cannot happen apart from the *community*. Paul and his group are inviting others to take their place in the gospel story. And Lydia becomes an essential part in their ability to proclaim the gospel in ways that are making real change. She became an integral part of establishing a church in this unlikely city of Philippi. *Here’s* where we recognize the “act of the Holy Spirit” for this week. And we know that the church in Philippi was strong and that they “got it.” It’s one of the few churches in Paul’s writings where he tells them, “Good job y’all! Keep it up!”

So then, where are we, as First Christian Church in Chico, California, building ties with other ministries that are aligned with this collaborative style? Ones that celebrate the gifts of all people regardless of their social status or ethnicity or political and theological persuasions. Partnerships that give us some framework to address the ministry needs of our community

with people who just can't seem to celebrate or even deal with "difference." I often entertain this little fantasy of how a big global catastrophe could somehow bring the world together and mend our deep divisions to help us face the catastrophe together. Then I remember the lessons from great works of science fiction like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *Watchmen* where things didn't work out so well in that scenario. We who are gathered in this room today are on the tail end of a global pandemic that had the *potential* to bring people together, but it seemed to make some divisions even worse.

We are seeing tens of thousands of people being galvanized and radicalized across this country and in this world. So then what does it look like to embrace a community that is open to listen to the voices like Lydia? Because Lydia is not a just a "product of conversion." She's an active participant in the ministry that's occurring here in Philippi. In other words, this isn't a story about Paul converting Lydia, it's God transforming an entire community. It is not Lydia that is being acted upon, it is Lydia being led by the Holy Spirit to act in *partnership* with the apostles. This is what the church is called to do. This is what happens when a church that affirms the resurrection gets over its own hang-ups and places God's agenda first. We know this because "He is risen."