

# “A Place of Prayer”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – July 5, 2021*

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 67

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 16:6-15

How can a person – or a group of people – know that they are being “forbidden” from something by the Holy Spirit? Why, according to this story, would the Spirit keep the apostles from continuing their missionary journey in Asia, instead guiding them to cross the Aegean Sea into Macedonia? And, how can we know to where God might be calling (or stopping) us, today?

In the opening verses of today’s reading, we hear details about the itinerary for Paul and his traveling companions. Twice, we are told that God’s Spirit prevents them from going where they attempted to go. How this happens, we do not exactly know. But our experiences of the Divine are often not easy to interpret or explain; thus, humility and spiritual maturity are needed for us to learn how to read the signs presented to us. Typically, we will need each other to make the most important decisions; faithful following is a team process.

So, after stumbling around the region, running into one barrier after another set before them, barred by the Spirit from going south and west into Asia, or going north into Bythinia; Paul appears to be backed into a coastal corner in Troas. We are reminded, here, that God is in charge of the church’s mission; that the church often searches for God’s calling through mistaken directions, aborted attempts, and arduous discernment.<sup>1</sup>

Because it comes at night, the ensuing vision is typically described as *The Macedonian Dream*. Paul sees a man beckoning him, begging for his help; though for what assistance he was hoping is left unsaid. Still, Paul and his companions appear to fully understand the dream: they set out for Macedonia; sailing across the Aegean Sea. Unlike the unsuccessful wandering that characterized the verses prior to the vision, here there is no hesitation and no meandering – immediately to Philippi they go.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Peterson from *WorkingPreacher.org*

On their first Sabbath day in the city, Paul and his companions go not to the synagogue – as was their typical practice – but to an unlikely location, where they reckon they would find a place of prayer. How they knew this, again, we are not told. What is clear is that the Spirit has led them thus far and continues to do so, now. Paul’s vision had involved a Macedonian man, but the first person to welcome the gospel message in Philippi was a woman, Lydia, who – in fact – was from the very region Paul had just left in the east. How odd, and grace-filled, that this woman who came from where the Spirit had forbidden the apostles to go is now met by them in Philippi.

We are told three specific details about Lydia. First, she is a worshipper of God; but not identified as a Jew and thus on the margins of that faith. She may well have been at worship by the river because she would not have been welcomed in the synagogue. Second, the naming of her hometown shows her to be a foreign woman; yet one who – as we see – willingly opens her home to welcome other travelers in. Finally, we learn that she is a dealer in purple cloth; her profession therefore points to an unusual level of status and wealth. She stands at the center of a radical reordering of both civic and domestic economies. She is the head of her own household and able to support the mission and ministry of the early church.<sup>2</sup>

The appointed meeting place, “a place of prayer,” is a gathering spot for both Jews and other “worshippers of God.” The fact that Paul and his companions were led by the Spirit to this place prompts us to wonder anew where the church today is called to go.

I have been thinking this weekend about the many different places where I have spent the Fourth of July holiday – on various travels, mission trips, and church conferences: from Paris to Washington, DC to Nantucket. From Montreat in the Blue Ridge hills to Birmingham in the sweltering south. Being able to join with and witness how other people celebrate their freedom helps to put into perspective how we value and live out the foundational principles of both our nation and our Christian faith. While those two sets of values are not always the same, they do overlap in having a cooperative focus. For, our personal liberty as citizens is inextricably linked to the collective freedom of all. In a similar way, the body of Christ can only thrive when everyone is afforded the same level of dignity and respect. We are each made in God’s image and when any are hurting, we cannot be whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts from Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*

This story of Lydia's conversion presents an opportunity for us to ask about whom we might harbor any bias or prejudice. Many of Paul's contemporaries would have been uncomfortable with worship that took place outside the synagogue, or sharing the gospel with a foreigner, or going to the home of a gentile; where a woman was the head of the household. And yet, they allowed Lydia to persuade them to accept her offer of hospitality. When she and the members of her house were baptized – the first to receive this sacrament on the continent of Europe – the early church's understanding of God's activity in the world expands even further.

Acts 16 will end with Paul and Silas returning to Lydia's home; marking the beginning and ending of their time in Philippi; and with Lydia signifying the kind of support that ministry needs in order to grow and thrive. It takes a team for ministry to be effective. Paul did not go it alone: he was there with Silas, Timothy and whoever it is that recounts the story for us. Then and now, the church is strengthened by those who demonstrate their faithfulness – like the apostles – in their public words and deeds; as well as by those who – like Lydia and the members of her household – extend generous hospitality.<sup>3</sup>

Any place of prayer – whether a traditional house of worship, or some more impromptu setting – requires these co-laborers in the faith. Now, as then, the Spirit calls us to reach across boundaries and discern opportunities to do God's work even in unexpected places. We might not all have the same background or experiences, be of the same age or ethnic group, or identify with the same party or belief system. But, we see in this story the Spirit reaching out to Jewish and Roman, Asian and European alike in order to create new communities of faith.

And we can see, in our own stories, how the Spirit forms bonds that span all sorts of differences. Though it may seem, at times, as if congregations like ours face one roadblock after another – from competing activities and ideologies to aging buildings and populations – God is always at work in seemingly mysterious and unexpected ways. Our job – together – is to discern where God is leading us – today; and what our role should be: are we the outspoken apostle who speaks boldly, or the supporter behind the scenes; are we teaching children and nurturing their families, or graciously offering hospitality to the stranger; are we sorting through donated clothes or bringing in canned goods for the food bank; are we

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Kaalund from *WorkingPreacher.org*

diligently saving our recycling to protect the earth or engaging in sometimes uncomfortable conversations to help promote greater equality?

The same Spirit that might forbid or keep us from pursuing one path will open up the way to a different one. In this place of prayer, we seek the discernment to understand where God calls us to go today; and in other, non-traditional places of prayer, we encounter our co-laborers in this missional endeavor, where God is already out ahead of us and at work transforming people and their lives. May we open our hearts to understand when we are invited to come and how we can help. And may God bless us on our individual and collective journeys of faith. Amen.