

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Pettit
May 30th, 2021
Acts 16: 9-15

The stories in the book of Acts tell us of the beginnings of the church. How it got started, how it began to take shape, and the challenges faced. Beginnings. We often root our understanding of a relationship or an institution by its origin stories. At dinner with new friends, you might tell the story of how you met your spouse or how you got started in your career. We tend to root our political opinions in some version of how our country began, what its founding premise was, or what the founding fathers intended. The Bible certainly has its beginning stories. In the beginning, God created. John 1: In the beginning was the Word. There is a connection between how we live and think and our perception or understanding of how things began. So, on this second Sunday of Pentecost, we attend to this early story of the church. What does it mean to be the church? What were its origins? In our own moment of new beginnings, does this story help us reset? Ground ourselves in the beginnings of the church?

In our passage, we find Paul west of the holy land in the Greek-speaking Roman empire and Philippi. Now Paul used to be big stuff in the circles he moved in. Not only that, he was a staunch proponent of tradition purely preserved. Remember, before God knocks him off his horse, blinds him, and converts him, Paul was commissioned by the Jewish leaders to root out heresy and troublemakers, to preserve the Jewish faith as is. They didn't want these splinter groups or off-shoots muddying the waters.

Now in this big city, Paul, who used to be somebody, is something of a nobody. And he is now appointed by God to spread the gospel throughout the Gentile world. He is now one of the rabble-rousers that he used to try to stop. He has embraced what he used to try to suppress. He has become an apostle of Christ, a leader of those who follow the way.

So, I have to think that when Paul comes to the river's edge on the outskirts of this big city and finds Lydia and a group of women talking faith, that the contrast to his own beginnings and training must have been a little jarring. Lydia and her house being baptized. What a different vision of this thing than the disciples and Paul must have started out with.

If you remember back to the lead-up to Good Friday, the disciples and many of Jesus' followers expected Jesus to upset the political order. Jesus and the disciples

were going to be working out of Jerusalem with full resources of the temple and that center of faith and nation. Religion and nation go together in their minds; faith and rule. To restore Israel was to restore power and to direct the people and faith from Jerusalem. Faith and law and societal order as one vision. It is a vision with roots in God's covenant with King David – that God's work and will would be brought about through the King. God worked through the King and through Jerusalem and through leadership, with God's blessings then trickling down to the people.

Paul was an emissary of that older order, commissioned to preserve pure Judaism. He is transformed through an encounter with the risen Christ. But Paul has been reared in such a vision – faith and rule, from Jerusalem out to the world.

This is a vision we have inherited too, an ideal of a society and a government that can represent and legislate an agenda for the world that meshes well with one's faith and worldview. Yes, we have inherited something of this theological orientation, that faith and politics get merged, and leaders are supposed to do God's work in the world, and so the battle for faith often takes place in the realm of politics. Unfortunately, we have competing visions of how that is supposed to happen, and what that looks like. And while I am generally for the separation of religion and state, I am guilty of such ideas myself. I would love a government that did justice for the poor and the neglected and held the powerful and wealthy to account. I would love to see Justice roll down like waters and righteousness an everflowing stream as Amos preached.

And while these visions are at play at the time of the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, what surprises everybody is that Jesus' agenda and good news are rooted more in the prophetic tradition, in the wilderness wandering tradition, in a non-landed and non-dominant tradition. In this tradition, faith and integrity and relationship with God happen apart from political power, apart from rule, apart from military might. It is walking in step with God through the wilderness, it is about keeping covenant with one another. Jesus doesn't unseat Rome, but he does spark a movement that happens without the power and resources of a restored Jerusalem.

So while folks are battling for voice in the political realm, off in Philippi along the river's edge, a very different vision of faith and community is taking shape.

Paul, a Jewish man, steeped in Jewish law and tradition goes to a city much more cosmopolitan than what he is used to. And as is his approach wherever he goes, he begins by seeking out the Jews of that place. He always starts with those most

fervent to the law and the faith. He seeks out those most like him, seeks to sway them to the way of Christ. He would begin in the synagogue trying to sway some to follow in the way, but in Philippi he struggled to even find that.

Upon arrival in Philippi he proceeds in just this manner. But there is no physical building. There's no physical Synagogue. So he goes on the Sabbath to where he hears rumor that there is a place of prayer. A "place of prayer" was an expression for synagogue worship in the absence of a building. Such places of prayer were often along the river where washing was available, outside the city gate where a sense of purity could be more easily established. And a building-less synagogue was established with the presence of ten men.

But Paul doesn't find ten men that morning. He finds a group of women. The commentators tell me this was common in places throughout the Greco-Roman world – women were particularly drawn to eastern religions, and the realm of religion was one area that women had more autonomy and freedom with.

So here is Paul on the river's edge. The vision of God ruling from Jerusalem through the leadership is gone. The hierarchy and political power he used to be able to leverage are gone. The traditional shape of Judaism and a synagogue building as a place of worship are all gone. What is left? The story of Christ, Christ's vision of grace and forgiveness, his death for the forgiveness of sins, and his resurrection to new birth and new life. That is what is left—the vision of a community whose bonds are Christ and love and grace and fellowship.

And who is the first convert to this way? It is Lydia. She is a woman of wit and wile who has navigated the world outside traditional lines. And she is baptized, but not just her, her whole house. This is the language of the household in a patriarchal world. The household follows the head of the household. Here it is the matriarch.

I love the picture of Lydia standing before Paul. She directs the baptism of her household. She insists that Paul and the other apostles stay at her house, to be hosted by her. These are roles traditionally reserved for the male head of the house. "She prevailed upon them," Luke writes. "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord," she said, then "come and stay at my home."

"If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord." How would you determine such things? What is your rubric? In the past, Paul could determine such things through more traditional modes, like adherence to purity laws, by adhering to traditional hierarchy and leadership, and such things. But what does one judge this by now?

I suspect that Lydia expected to be judged by her heart, her spirit, and her love and desire to follow God. I suspect she expected to be judged by the way she treated others, and led her household, and cared for the needs of others. She had no traditional structures to rely on to validate her, only her heart and her actions. Paul had no good rubric to decide either. Only her heart and her actions.

Paul and Lydia. What a pair? Starting a new community of faith through heart and love for Christ, and their actions in the world.

Now Paul prefers more traditional modes, it comes through in his writings when issues of women teaching come up, or around changes in traditions and purity. And I suppose if there was a whole crowd there at Philippi and he could pick his church leaders there, Lydia may not be at the top of the list. But without all those other structures and traditions and conveniences, Paul is confronted with how God is at work. He is perhaps more open to the grace of God at work in Lydia's life, even as that grace has been at work in his own life.

You see sometimes in the church, our traditions, and our differences, and our preferences, and our proclivity for power and influence can obscure and distract. And like it is in our house sometimes, when everybody's riled up and pointing fingers, and we can't unravel what is going on, we just say, "let's start over." Let's get back on track. Perhaps the church would do well to do the same, to go back to how we started, to what Christ has called us to. To be open enough to see how the grace of God is at work in the people around us. To be willing to follow the Spirit's lead, and to be a community of faith.

What does it mean to be judged faithful to the Lord? It comes down to one's heart, to one's relationship with the Lord, to one's actions and attitudes towards others. What if we went back to the basics? What if we like Lydia and her household were willing to be baptized and to navigate the world in our own untraditional ways, but to do so full of heart and passion, and a concern that we might live out this faith in such a way that others would be attracted to it. To not try to legislate our vision, but to enact it in every small way we can imagine.

Now, I suppose if a consultant were to meet with Paul, he might be skeptical. This is your plan to reach the world? In a big city, gathering by the river with a small group of women and Lydia's family. Humble beginnings. But then again, this seems to be God's preferred approach. To take the smallest, and the least, to plant the smallest seed and expect something significant to grow from it. The key seems to be a willingness and a discernment to follow the Spirit's lead, and to affirm the grace of Christ at work in each of our lives.

These are the beginnings of the church. May we, in our own season of new beginnings, be faithful to it. To not worry about the size or the numbers, but the substance of the faith, the leading of the Spirit, how God's grace is at work, and to nurture it.

Acts 16: 9-15

⁹ During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

The Conversion of Lydia

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

A Prayer for Memorial Day by William Sloan Coffin Jr., 1983 (William Sloan Coffin Jr. was a Presbyterian Minister and served as Pastor at Riverside Church in New York City)

Gracious God, whose own Son's term of service to humanity was so full that its brevity was no distress, we call to mind on this Memorial Sunday those "who will not grow old as we who are left to grow old," those whose lives were too brief for us but long enough, perhaps, for thee. Forgive us that they died so young because we were too unimaginative, too imperious, too indifferent, or just too late to think of better ways than warfare to conduct the business of the world. Gratefully we remember the generosity that prompted them to share the last of their rations, the last pair of dry socks, to share in the course of one hour in a foxhole more than most of us care to share with another in a lifetime. And we recall the courage that made more than one of them fall on the grenade there was no time to throw back.

Grant, O God, that they may not have died in vain. May we draw new vigor from past tragedy. Buttress our instincts for peace, sorely beleaguered. Save us from justifications invented to make us look noble, grand, and righteous and from blanket solutions to messy, detailed problems. Give us the vision to see that those nations that gave the most to their generals and least to their poor were, throughout history, the first to fall. Most of all, give us the vision to see that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, too small for anything but love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who became what we are to make us what he is. Amen.

Announcements:

Bike ride next week – the privilege to come together in this important opportunity to support and provide for those in need, and those working to provide for those needs.

- Team Providence has raised 7k.
- Next Sunday, John Kullman will be preaching.
- Rev. Dr. Bob Hampel will lead communion, with the assistance of Steve H.

Coffee and Conversation – gather at the church 9am. We'll pick up on the sermon or another reading and spend time in conversation and fellowship. I invite you to join us.

Prayers:

- Dana and her announcement, prayers for her and the church in these summer months as her role with Providence comes to a close.
- Andy Hankins
- Ken Stabler, having to make decisions about surgery and whether to move towards returning home or other options.
- Gary and his wife navigating health decisions