

BEYOND THE STAINED GLASS

Carl Wilton

Lamington Presbyterian Church

February 24, 2019, Non-lectionary sermon

Acts 16:9-15; Matthew 28:16-20

“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.”

Acts 16:14

There’s an old saying you may have heard before. Some people think it comes from the Bible — although it really doesn’t. It’s just one of those inspirational proverbs that makes the rounds: “When God closes a door, God opens another.”

Maybe you’ve found that proverb to be true in your own life. I hope so.

One person who found it to be true was the Apostle Paul. We heard about that experience in our first lesson.

Paul, Timothy and Silas have been traveling through the land mass known as Asia Minor — the country we know today as Turkey. They began in Antioch, in the southeast corner, and have been working their way up, zigzag fashion, to the northwest corner.

The church, in these Greek colonial cities, has been growing like nobody’s business. Paul and his companions have been confident, all along, that they’ve been part of something much bigger than themselves.

Until now. Suddenly, the old formula has stopped working. We don't know what, exactly, has led them to think so, but their forward progress has stopped. Luke simply tells us they've "been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia."

Asia, by the way, is not the vast continent we usually think of when we hear that word. Here, it's the name of a Roman province that covers the southwestern part of Turkey.

They've headed off, instead, to the region in central Turkey known as Galatia, and from there to the adjacent region known as Phrygia. It would seem, logically, that their next destination ought to be the province of Bithynia, which covers the northern coast of Turkey.

But, think again. Luke says "they attempted to go into Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."

What does that mean? How did they know? Your guess is as good as mine. Does it mean all three of them got the willies when they thought of crossing the border? Did someone have a dream or vision? Did they get to the border only to find the road was under construction? Did they run out of money? Nobody knows. Bottom line is, the door is closed. They can only await the opening of another.

The place they decide to wait is the port city of Troas, on the Aegean Sea. It's near the site of ancient Troy.

Instructions from the Holy Spirit are not long in coming.

Paul has a dream. In his dream, he sees a man from Macedonia, in northern Greece. The man has a message for them: “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”

Now, that may sound simple enough, but in that day and age it’s anything but. You can’t walk to Macedonia from Turkey. You’ve got to get on a ship and cross the sea.

That was not the easiest thing to do, in the First Century. In fact, it was downright dangerous.

Let me remind you of a few things they didn’t have back then, that today we take for granted. There were no compasses to tell the direction of travel. The first magnetic compasses wouldn’t arrive from China for a thousand years. There were no sextants, either, to measure the precise distance between sun, moon or stars and the horizon. Greek and Roman ship captains determined their position by dead reckoning (another word for “educated guessing”). They knew the sun rose in the east and set in the west. They knew how to find the North Star at night. They knew a little something about the speed of predictable winds and currents, and they had a primitive navigation chart that showed the rough shape of coastlines and where the biggest rocks and shoals were located.

If conditions were clear, they could usually find their way. Give them a day or two of overcast, or fog, or — worse yet — storms, and they would have no idea.

For that reason, ancient mariners preferred to stay within sight of land — but not too close, because the Mediterranean coastlines are notoriously rocky and dangerous.

Lots of ships set sail and were never heard from again. Travel by sea was a risky business. Everybody knew it. You just didn't walk up the gangplank unless you really had to.

So, when Paul has this vision of a Macedonian man saying, “Come over and help us,” and shares it the next morning with his companions Silas and Timothy, the decision isn't anything they take lightly.

But they go. They go because the Holy Spirit has somehow closed off the land route. And the great commission of Jesus to go and make disciples of all nations — which just so happens to be our second reading that day — is still ringing in their ears.

All that is prologue to today's reading from Acts. In the very first verse we learn that Paul and his companions have made the arduous ocean voyage. They've arrived in the port of Philippi, one of the principal cities of Macedonia.

It's in Philippi that Paul does something different from his usual pattern. In most of the cities he's visited, he starts his preaching and teaching in the synagogue. For a Christian evangelist in that era, this is a natural destination:

Christianity, in these early days, hasn't yet distinguished itself as a religion set apart from Judaism. It was in the synagogues that the early followers of Jesus worshiped. It was in the synagogues that they studied and debated the scriptures. It was out of the synagogues that they formed the first Christian communities.

So the synagogue in Philippi would have been the natural place to start. But Paul doesn't go there: or if he does, the book of Acts is silent about it. What Acts does tell us is how Paul visits a certain spot along the banks of a river — a location described as “a place of prayer.”

So, what is this place of prayer? It's a place where people gathered who weren't so comfortable in the synagogue, who didn't feel fully welcomed there.

Those people were known, in those days, as “the God Fearers.” The God Fearers had not been born as Jews, but they had a fascination with the Jewish religion. They were Greeks for the most part: but the men among them could never fully convert to Judaism unless they underwent the painful — and, in those days, medically risky — surgery of adult circumcision. So, they and their families stayed on the fringes of the community.

One of those “fringes” was the place of prayer by the river. To the people who habitually gathered there, the message of Paul and his companions had instant appeal. A great many members of the early church came from this Greek-speaking

group. Jesus' message of love as over against legalism spoke to their deepest spiritual desires.

It's in that place by the river that Paul encounters a woman who will prove to be very important to him. Her name is Lydia — a Gentile name. She comes not from Philippi at all, but from Thyatira, in the very region of northwestern Turkey Paul has just left. Lydia, it seems, has settled in Philippi: a foreigner living in that city.

More than that, she's an independent businesswoman: "a dealer in purple cloth," the book of Acts tells us. The city of Thyatira, where she comes from, was noted as a center of the manufacture of purple dye.

In those days, purple dye was the most expensive of all colors. It came from the lining of a rare seashell. It was costly and difficult to produce. Only the very rich could afford to wear purple clothing. This means Lydia was herself well-connected. If not a member of the wealthiest class, she was at least used to trading with them.

Maybe the equivalent today would be the owner of a Rolls Royce auto dealership. You don't need to move a lot of that product to make a boatload of money.

Lydia is probably the last person Paul and his companions would expect to encounter at a Jewish “place of prayer” on a riverbank outside a Greek city. When you’re led by the Holy Spirit, though, you’ve got to expect a few surprises

Paul makes her a leader in the Philippian church. His vision of the gospel sees no contradiction in that. It may have been “a man of Macedonia,” in Paul’s vision, who invites him to cross over from Asia into Europe; yet the person who becomes his closest associate in Philippi is not a man at all, but a woman: and a Gentile woman at that.

Lydia responds to the apostle’s confidence in her by inviting Paul and his companions to take up lodging in her house. That house will soon become the center of Christian evangelization in Philippi: and all because Paul goes looking for converts not in the usual places, but along the banks of a river.

What Paul does is look beyond the stained glass. We’ve got lovely stained glass windows in this Sanctuary — as many churches do. Stained glass makes this a place of beauty: filtering light from the outside through the colored panes.

There’s one problem with stained glass windows, though: *they don’t let you see out.*

It’s symbolic of a problem we have here: as many long-established churches do. After many years — even many generations — of encountering God within

these walls, we come to associate spiritual life with this sacred space. We forget what the book of Acts tells us of the place by the river, and the meaningful encounters that happen there, in the open-air setting. Far from following our Lord's command to go and make disciples of all nations, we're more comfortable saying to all nations, "Stop by sometime and join us. The door's open!" Then we sit and wait, wondering why so few cross the threshold.

The challenge is how we as a congregation move beyond mere maintenance — simply keeping things as they are — and on into mission. One writer, seeking to teach churches the difference between maintenance and mission, came up with twelve points of comparison between these two types of churches. The answers to these questions help determine whether this or any church, in its heart of hearts, is a maintenance or a mission congregation:

1. In measuring EFFECTIVENESS, the maintenance congregation typically asks, "How many pastoral visits are being made?" The mission congregation asks, "How many disciples are being made?"
2. When contemplating some form of CHANGE, the maintenance congregation says, "If this new project proves upsetting to any of our members, we won't do it." The mission congregation says, "If this will help us reach someone on the outside, how can we *not* do it?"
3. Again, when thinking about CHANGE, the majority of members in a maintenance congregation ask, "How is this change going to affect me?" The majority of members in the mission congregation ask, "Will this change increase our ability to reach those outside our walls?"

4. When trying to articulate its VISION FOR MINISTRY, the maintenance congregation proudly declares, “We have to be faithful to our past.” The mission congregation says, instead, “We have to be faithful to our future.”

5. The pastor in a maintenance congregation says to the NEWCOMER, “I’d like to introduce you to some of our members.” In the mission congregation, it’s exactly reversed. The members say to the newcomer, “We’d like to introduce you to our pastor.”

6. When confronted with a LEGITIMATE PASTORAL CONCERN, the pastor in the maintenance congregation asks, “How can I meet this need?” The pastor in the mission congregation asks, “How can our people meet this need?”

7. If there’s one thing the maintenance congregation is afraid of, it’s conflict. The maintenance congregation seeks to avoid conflict at any cost (but rarely succeeds). The mission congregation is different. It understands that CONFLICT IS A NATURAL BY-PRODUCT OF GROWTH, and is willing to pay that price....

8. The LEADERSHIP STYLE in the maintenance congregation is primarily MANAGERIAL. Leaders — be they elders, deacons or pastors — see themselves as successful if everything is in order and running smoothly. The leadership style in a mission congregation is different. It’s primarily TRANSFORMATIONAL: casting a vision of what could be, and marching right off the map, if necessary, in order to make the vision reality.

9. The maintenance congregation focuses ON ITS MEMBERS. The mission congregation focuses ON THE CULTURE. It strives to understand how unchurched people think and what makes them tick. It tries to determine their needs, and to identify what in their lives makes them open to the gospel.

10. When thinking about GROWTH, the maintenance congregations asks, “HOW MANY PRESBYTERIANS live within a twenty-minute drive of this church?” The mission congregation asks, “HOW MANY UNCHURCHED PEOPLE live within a twenty-minute drive of this church?”

11. The maintenance congregation looks at the community and asks, “HOW CAN WE GET THESE PEOPLE TO SUPPORT OUR CONGREGATION?” The mission congregation asks, “HOW CAN THE CHURCH SUPPORT THESE PEOPLE?”

12. The maintenance congregation burns a lot of energy thinking about HOW TO SAVE THEIR CONGREGATION. The mission congregation spends its energy thinking about HOW TO REACH THE WORLD.¹

It is, as I'm sure you'll agree, a challenging list. But that's what happens when you enter that unknown territory out beyond the stained glass. You get challenged.

Let me tell you one more story. It comes from business-management literature, and it's kind of a classic. Just over a hundred years ago, there was one industry in America that was more firmly established than any other. That business was the railroad.

In the late 1800s, no industry could come close to the railroad in wealth, power and sheer influence. Steel rails ran from one end of the continent to the other. Everything of importance in our country moved along them.

Then a new invention came along: the automobile. When those first prototype cars were developed, there was one industry in this land — the railroad — that seemed ideally situated to bring this new technology to the people. Only the railroads had the wealth, the manufacturing facilities, the sheer muscle, to bring out such a product. Management guru Tom Peters, in his classic book, *The Search For*

¹Harold Percy, *Good News People: An Introduction to Evangelism for Tongue-Tied People* (Forward Movement Publications, 1996).

Excellence, tells why the railroad industry failed to take advantage of this incredible opportunity.

The railroad robber barons — as adept at they were at assembling monopolies and driving competitors out of business — made one fundamental mistake. *They didn't understand what business they were in.* In Peters' words, “they thought they were in the train business. But, they were in fact in the transportation business. Time passed them by, as did opportunity. They couldn't see what their real purpose was.”

The question before us — and any church — is this: are we in the church business? Or are we in the Christianity business? Is the focus of our attention primarily on the inside of the stained glass — or on the outside?

How we as a congregation answer that question makes all the difference.

Let us pray:

**Give us eyes to see, O God:
to see as you see,
and to see those people you see.
Remind us that you have called us to be
a sent-out people,
not a stay-put people.
Help us to move beyond the stained glass:
into the world you love
and for which Christ died.**