

6th Sunday of Easter – Eager Listening – Acts 16:9-15
May 26, 2019

Gracious God, Welcoming Christ, Empowering Spirit: stir the waters by which we gather. In the ways you receive us, teach us how to receive others. In the grace with which you create a home for us, may we be bold to practice hospitality. Amen.

Today is the sixth Sunday of Easter, that time when we continue to explore the joy of Easter. Next Sunday will be the final Sunday of Eastertide, followed by Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday and then a month from today we move into Ordinary Time, that time between Easter and Advent which really is anything but ordinary, but denotes time devoid of special holidays and on a trivia note – allows pastors to wear any stole they feel drawn to on a Sunday rather than the white, red, green, or purple specified during Lent/Easter/Eastertide and Advent/Christmas/Epiphany.

Today we also had the choice between a continuation of Jesus preparing his disciples for the time when he would no longer be with them or a passage centered on Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth whom Paul met in Philippi a city in Macedonia. I thought since we are receiving a woman (Cathy) into membership in our church family it would be most fitting to talk about the women who supported Jesus in his ministry and perhaps talk a bit about Paul's vision that led him to meet Lydia.

We know that women were those who were seemingly most loyal to Jesus. It was Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Salome and other unnamed women who stood vigil at the cross where Jesus was dying and then on the first day of the week took spices to the tomb to anoint his body. Meanwhile the male disciples ran away and hid out of fear for their own lives. While Lydia didn't meet Jesus, she did

encounter Paul. She was already a God worshiper or God follower, a reference to a non-Jew who is attracted to monotheism (one God) and Judaism in that time.

We don't know much about Lydia really. It doesn't appear she is married, because she makes her own decisions. The text talks about her household, but we don't know if they are family – perhaps she is widowed and has children in her household or perhaps her household consists of servants and workers in her cloth business. We can assume she is fairly wealthy because she has her own home and deals in purple cloth which is extremely expensive and generally used only by nobility or the really wealthy. You might ask why it is expensive because today we pay no more for purple cloth or purple yarn or purple clothes for that matter than we pay for any other color. The answer is purple cloth in those days required tens of thousands of sea snails to extract enough of this purple dye. So, let's leave Lydia for a moment and learn how Paul found her.

Paul has been reaching out to preach the Word of God with some of his companions – Barnabas, Mark, Timothy and this trip he has Silas accompanying him. Now, all of the disciples are being led in their ministry by the Holy Spirit and this trip is no exception. Twice during this journey, the text tells us the Holy Spirit stopped Paul and Silas from the path they were planning – when they were headed for Asia and again when they were stopped from entering Bithymia. Can you imagine being stopped from doing something by the Holy Spirit? We don't pay close enough attention today, I fear. Paul had a vision in the night – a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come to Macedonia and help them. Now visions were not rare in the New Testament and we generally hear of folks following those visions. Sometimes they needed a little prodding. Abram and Sarai were a little reluctant to hear God when he promised them a son in their old age and Moses was

sure he couldn't lead the Israelites because he stuttered, but eventually both of them followed God's vision for them. The fact that a woman was cast in the role of being other than "property" was exceptional – and the fact that she was named is also exceptional as many women in the Bible were not named.

How about visions in our world? I have my own theory and that is – we are too busy, too tethered to electronics, not enough "alone" time and each of you could probably add to that list. Yes, life was tough in Biblical days, but remember, they basically walked everywhere so they had lots of time to think and pray and listen for God to speak to them. When we talk of God's vision in the church today, we typically mean strategic planning as in what does God have in store for our church – something I am sure is on the minds of most everyone here today as you prepare to transition from a settled pastor to pulpit supply and then an interim pastor to help you determine what is next. It certainly is on my mind as I try to discern God's plan for my life going forward. The bottom line here is that our well-conceived *scripting* of God's vision, if it is even that, is a very different affair from *receiving from God* a vision. God does have a plan for both the church and for me – if we will only be patient and listen with open ears, eyes and minds.

Let's return to Paul and Silas in Philippi. In the Jewish faith it requires ten men to have a temple service and apparently there were not ten Jewish men in Philippi because there is no synagogue. Gentiles would not be allowed to practice their pagan faith inside the city gates, but would go to a place outside the city, a river in this case, on the sabbath. With no synagogue devout Jews would also find space by water, probably because water is required for the cleansing rituals of Judaism. Paul and Silas look for this place of prayer and instead of finding devout Jews they find a group of women praying and sit down with them. Lydia and her

household are a part of this group – Lydia in particular is interested in learning more about Judaism which worships one God instead of the many gods worshipped by the pagan faiths.

The text tells us that the Lord opened Lydia’s heart to hear the words of Paul and she listened eagerly to his words. She and her entire household were baptized at which point she invites Paul, Silas and apparently Luke because Luke, as he writes the story in the book of Acts, states, “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 man from Macedonia pleaded with Paul to come and help. Did Paul and his party ever meet the man from Macedonia, or were they being drawn to witness to Lydia and her household? It almost didn’t happen, this meeting of the businesswoman and her household and the missionaries. Paul was a faithful servant of God, open to being guided by God. The Holy Spirit prepares Lydia’s heart to hear, receive and understand. The Lord opened her heart. In *Feasting on the Word*, Richard Landers tells us, “Authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community, not simply the missionary’s need to proclaim. Congregations and individual Christians looking for ways to engage in innovative ministry can look to this passage in Acts for examples of the transformative role of prayer and worship.” The work of the Holy Spirit requires us to listen with open hearts and be ready to hear God’s Word. Amen.