

Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15

Overhearing the Gospel

Fifteen years ago, Rabbi Jack Romberg and I convened a new organization which we dubbed “Tallahassee Interfaith Clergy.” I’m happy to say that organization has recently been re-booted and the best thing about version 2.0 is that white male preachers like me are in the minority. This development is good for many reasons, but it’s especially good for my own soul.

You see, meeting with other clergy tends to bring out at least two of the worst aspects of my character.

Have you ever noticed how preachers have a pronounced proclivity toward ponderous peroration? In other words, we talk funny. We don’t say, “It’s good to have so-and-so here.” We say, “How well and good it is to have so-and-so in our midst.” Nobody says “in our midst” except preachers.

For another thing, preachers – especially pastors – are terribly competitive. I quit the intramural touch football team at seminary for that reason. It was just touch football, but I was in fear for my life. Get preachers in a room together, and the conversation runs like this:

“How’d your stewardship program go this year?”

“What’s your budget like?”

“How many kids in your youth group?”

The latest bit of clerical jargon combines both of these unenviable traits. It’s the word “worship” used in a very particular – not to say blasphemous – sense, as in this exchange between two pastors:

“How many do you *worship* in that new sanctuary you built?”

“Oh, we *worship* about 400 on an average. We used to *worship* about 350, but now that we’ve added that contemporary service, we *worship* about 400.”

This goes to show you that the Almighty is indeed merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. A lesser god would have stopped that nonsense long ago with a few well-placed lightning bolts.

Probably because presbytery met last week, I was thinking about the foibles of ministers of Word and Sacrament as I studied today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Was Paul like modern preachers? Did he long for success? Did he ever ask another apostle how many he “worshipped” last week?

On the surface, this story from Acts reads like a passage from a sea-captain’s log.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony ...

I picture a scene straight out of *Treasure Island*, with Paul seated at a table in the tavern, a tankard of ale in his hand, and a gaggle of old salts hanging on his every word.

“Aye, matey, them Aegean waters can be treacherous in some seasons. Ye must o’ had fair winds,” says a fellow with a peg leg and a patch over his left eye.

“That we did, that we did,” replies Paul. “Fair winds and a following sea.”

It’s just a bit too romantic, too much like preachers round the coffee pot indulging in clerical bravado. What the lectionary leaves out is the part about this being Paul’s third try after two other failed attempts.

Fresh from the apostolic powwow in Jerusalem, at which they received permission to take the gospel into new territories, Paul, Timothy, and Silas tried to go into the Roman province of Asia. Bam! The Holy Spirit slammed the door in their faces.

Next they tried to go into Bithynia, just to the north. But, Luke says, **“the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.”** Another door slammed shut.

So they went down to Troas, a port city on the Aegean coast in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), more or less awaiting orders. They finally came in a dream.

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.”

So Paul and his companions set out. (At this point the narrative switches to the first-person plural “we.” Some scholars think that’s because Luke himself joined the expedition at this juncture in the journey.)

They sailed across the northern tip of the Aegean Sea to the island of Samothrace, halfway between Troas and Neapolis, the seaport of Philippi. They landed in Neapolis after another day’s sailing. The next day they journeyed overland to Philippi, which Luke describes as **“a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.”**

Although it was not the capital of Macedonia, Philippi was indeed a “leading city.” There were lots of former Roman soldiers there, for in such colonial cities retired legionnaires enjoyed the rights of Roman citizenship. There were people of many races and tongues, drawn by the thriving economy. And, of course, there were folks of various religious persuasions.

When the Sabbath arrived, Paul went on down to the river, where he heard the Jews of Philippi gathered to worship and study the Torah. Picture an open-air synagogue – congregation Shomrei Bush Arbor. There Paul preached the first Christian sermon in Europe.

It wasn’t what you might call a spectacular event. Just a few women showed up. There was not a man among them. If there had been, you can be sure Luke would have mentioned it. Paul preached anyway. Don’t you wish we had a tape of that sermon? Judging from the form of other sermons in Acts, and from what we know about the *kerygma*, the apostolic proclamation, we can make an educated guess.

I imagine that Paul told them about Jesus – how he had fulfilled the prophets' longing for a Messiah, not by conquering with sword and armies, but by suffering and dying on a cross. Paul told the women how God had raised Jesus from the dead, and that God's kingdom was coming through him.

Then, I think, Paul must have told them about his own life – how he had persecuted the church, arresting men and women alike, and throwing them in prison. Perhaps he told them how he had held the cloaks of those who had stoned Stephen to death, and how he had shouted encouragement. Then he told them of his journey to Damascus, of the voice from heaven no one else could hear, and of those days of darkness when he could not see. Then the scales fell from his eyes, and he believed the gospel, and he was baptized in the name of the same Jesus whose followers he had persecuted.

Then, I'm sure, Paul must have called upon those women to repent and believe the good news of Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord.

Something Paul said in his sermon to that all-female congregation on the riverside outside the gates of Philippi struck a chord in the heart of one woman there. Her name was Lydia. She was a first-century entrepreneur, a seller of purple cloth, and, apparently, a woman of some wealth.

Maybe Paul's willingness to share his story with a bunch of women moved her to listen. Maybe something he said about his own life triggered something deep in her. Who knows exactly how the Spirit works to open anyone's heart to the gospel?

I know a man who grew up in the Christian Science tradition. He knew about Jesus. He'd heard about him in the context of that well-meaning, but essentially Gnostic, tradition. For many years after he was grown, he went to no church at all. After his wife was baptized and joined a Presbyterian church, he began to come with her to worship.

The people in that church welcomed him. They asked him to join, too, but they didn't put any pressure on him. They gave space for the Spirit to work. He came most every Sunday for several years. Now and then he and the pastor of

the church talked about the faith and about church membership. He listened to the sermons. He sang the hymns. He watched the people eat the bread and drink the wine of Communion. He witnessed baptisms. He came to church suppers. He helped out at the homeless shelter. He even performed in a play the church put on.

Then, on a Sunday close to Easter, he came forward after worship, when the Session met to receive new members. He told the elders he wanted to join and be baptized. On Good Friday, the day before his baptism, he told the pastor,

“You know, I’ve heard a version of the gospel all my life, but just recently something clicked. I understand now that Jesus died on the cross to show that God loves me and forgives my sins. I realize now that I’m a sinner who’s been forgiven. Even at my age, that’s the best news I ever heard.”

Somehow, by grace, in the life of a very ordinary congregation, that brother overheard the gospel.

Who knows what Lydia heard in Paul’s sermon that day? Who knows what anybody hears in sermons? Whatever it was, something clicked inside her. Luke puts it this way: **“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”** Then she and her whole household were baptized, and Lydia, the seller of purple cloth, the female entrepreneur of Philippi, became the first convert to the Christian faith on the continent of Europe.

Lydia overheard the gospel.

“How many did you worship at that camp meeting by the river, Brother Paul?”

“Well, brother, to tell you the truth, it was just a handful, and there wasn’t a man among them.”

“How many souls did you save?”

“Not a single one, my friend. But somehow, by grace, a woman named Lydia overheard the gospel as I was preaching it, and the Lord opened her heart, and she believed.”

“Just the one? You weren’t very successful, were you, Paul?”

“No, I don’t suppose I was.”

Paul went on from Philippi to Athens, then Thessalonica, then Corinth. He never made it back to that leading city of Macedonia. But years later, an old man in a Roman prison, he wrote to the church that he, Timothy, Silas, and, of course, sister Lydia had had founded there. Here’s how he began his letter:

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me . . .

I hope one day, when we are old and tired, we will look back on our life as a congregation and remember not how many we “worshipped,” but how great was the **“sharing of the gospel from the first day until now.”**

Sharing God’s grace – sharing and overhearing the gospel -- in the end, that’s what Paul was grateful for. Sisters and brothers in Christ: in the end, that’s all that matters.