

The Easter Community is Responsive

Acts 16: 1-15

May 16, 2004

This is the second in a series of sermons about the Easter Community. Last week we talked about the Easter Community as accepting--accepting of one another and of strangers. This morning I invite you to think about the Easter Community as responsive--responsive to the Spirit.

Someone has said, "If you want God to laugh, tell God your plans!" They may have meant this in a rueful sort of way, implying that God would laugh at us foolish, ignorant humans because we don't know enough to make plans for the future. I prefer to take it another way--to think that God's plans for us are so much better, so much larger than any plans we might make, that God has to give a gentle chuckle.

Perhaps God was amused with Paul and the plans he made for spreading the gospel. The scripture says, "they were forbidden by the Spirit to preach in Asia." We don't know how this happened. We don't know whether Paul was so in tune with the Spirit that he just knew he wasn't to go or whether obstacles were placed in his way that made it clear that this wasn't to be his path. I imagine he was disappointed. He already had friends in that area. He probably had dreamed of the great work he would do for Christ there. But the Spirit prevented it. And so Paul traveled all the way across what is now Turkey. He next thought of going to Bythina, which is in what is now northern Turkey, but again the Spirit said "No." Instead he had a vision--a vision of a man in Macedonia saying, "Come over and help us." Someone has called this a magical, mystical invitation--an invitation to make a change, enter new territory, and relate to different people. And immediately, he and his friends set out for Macedonia. What a difference that response made--for the church, and for us, because Macedonia was the first place in Europe where the gospel was preached. Paul's first journey to Macedonia and Greece was the beginning of the spread of the gospel westward to Rome, to what became France, to Spain, and eventually to the rest of Europe and Britain, and finally to the United States. In a way that Macedonian man was speaking for us--asking for help for us. Perhaps the Spirit knew that the churches already begun in Asia would survive and thrive without Paul, knew that it was time to move on--to share the good news in a completely new direction.

There's a wonderful contrast here. Macedonia, just north of Greece, was the country of Alexander the Great. Alexander had set out from there, going East to conquer the known world--to unite it under his rule. Paul made the same journey in the opposite direction to bring the message of Christ to the known world, to unite it under the reign of Christ. Alexander moved with a mighty army. Paul traveled with just a few friends.

After his experience Paul would agree with our saying that when God closes one door God opens another. Paul responded, not by pounding angrily at the closed door, but by immediately taking the door that was opened. He headed to Macedonia. It's always a humbling experience when we look back and see the Spirit at work in our lives. Sometimes, small unrelated events are the Spirit's stepping stones to major transformations in our lives. There is a contemporary gospel song that says, "He's preparing me for something I cannot handle right now." When God's spirit prepares us, barriers of tradition, habit, ritual, and selfish agendas come crumbling down.

Have you had similar experiences in your life--times when something you felt called to do just didn't work out? Or have you had to face something you wished you didn't have to do? When you look back years later can you see God's hand at work? Even our Lord asked in Gethsemane. "Please let this cup pass from me. Please, do I have to die?" But he also said, "Not my will, but yours be done," and he endured the cross. And God's plan was this glorious resurrection and the salvation of the world.

Some years ago my friend Jean Vieten told me "Jamie Matthias has been made designated pastor of Community Church." I responded, "I didn't even know they were looking for someone. Gee I'd have liked that job." For some reason, the Spirit forbade it. Maybe you wouldn't have chosen me then, maybe I wasn't ready, wasn't experienced enough. Maybe the Spirit had work to be done here that only Jamie could do. Whatever the reason, the door was closed by the time I found out about it. Later, in God's good time it was opened, and I'm grateful.

Our friend Lori Saunders was going on a mission trip to Rwanda. Three days before she was to leave her trip was canceled. So she was at her home church to meet the man who helped her plan a group trip to Zimbabwe, which Joe and I joined, and that led eventually to the trip to Kenya which Joe and Helen Huntley and I experienced. Instead of one person going to

Ruwanda, there were 2 teams of people going to different countries in Africa.

Our job is to be open to the Spirit's leading. What doors is the Spirit closing for this church? What doors are opening? Are the homeless children the Dominican Republic needing our help? What doors are opening in this community? We need to pray and be open to these possibilities.

That leads us to look at how Paul and his friends acted in Macedonia. The real story taking place here is about a cultural breakthrough that occurs when Paul takes the extraordinary steps of taking the gospel to the Gentile Roman colony called Philippi. In Philippi there seemed to be no synagogue, so the Jews usually gathered by the riverside to pray. On the sabbath, Paul and his companions met several women there. If they were disappointed they didn't show it. They didn't walk upriver or back to town, still looking for the man from Macedonia in the vision. They sat down and talked with the the women. What a cultural breakthrough! Remember Jesus and the woman at the well? For a Jewish man to talk with a woman in public was against the custom of that day.

And the result? This encounter led to the conversion of Lydia. The scripture makes it plain that her conversion is due to God's preparation for her to receive Paul's message. She is called a God worshiper--that was an expression for a gentile who turned to Judaism to worship and learn more about God. As we can learn from the way Paul and his friends responded to the spirit, we can also learn from Lydia. Lydia was seeking, was open, was expectant. She came to the river, to the place for prayer, looking for a message from God. Notice the scripture says, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" (16:14b).

As you know, I've been reading the book Private Prayer in Public Places by our own Don Shockley. Don was for some years the Chaplain at the University of Redlands and a vital member of this church. Listen to this passage from the beginning of his book. See why Don reminds me of Lydia.

As a student pastor attempting to cope with the twin pressures of academic

work and sermon preparation, I formed the unfortunate habit of finishing

my sermon on Sunday mornings. Often ideas that had seemed

promising earlier in the week began to look more and more empty as the week progressed. Many Saturday nights I went to bed thinking I still had nothing worth saying. But when Sunday dawned it was a do or die situation. Facing a forty-minute drive in addition to the final preparation, I would be out of the dormitory by six o'clock and on my way to a local donut shop where a cup of coffee would jolt my head awake. Before long I discovered that I could work rather well right there at the counter and I was soon jotting down notes as I sipped the coffee. This public place, being neither church nor campus, curiously freed my mind from the distractions associated with those more familiar environments. Eventually, this coffee shop interlude became a kind of ritual and, finally, a completely necessary step in the process of getting ready to speak, regardless of how well prepared I was beforehand... [In these places] I often hear or see things...that make a direct contribution to what I am thinking about at the time... Many year ago now, during the season of Advent, I sat at the counter of a sandwich shop in my hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. I had been there for half an hour, attempting to get started with a sermon for the season, when a waitress who had been observing my note making with growing apprehension confronted me with an accusation. I was, she charged, an undercover agent for the parent company, sent to evaluate employee performance. When I had reassured her, without divulging my real business, she turned to leave me. And, with a marvelous slip of the tongue, she exclaimed, "Well, I'm sure glad you're not one of those *expecters*." I could have jumped for joy! "Dear lady," I wanted to say, "I am in fact *the chief expecter!* It is my job to go into places like this and expect someone to tell me something of spiritual significance. And you have met my expectations extraordinarily well! (p. xvi)

Are we great expecters like Don, like Lydia? Are we open to the word from

the Spirit, whether it comes to us on Sunday morning, or over the lunch counter on Wednesday?

Notice, Lydia not only opened up her heart, she opened up her home. She insisted that Paul and his friends stay in her home. You remember these words from the old Spiritual, “We may not pray like Peter, we may not preach like Paul, but we can show the love of Jesus and say he died for all.” That was Lydia. Once she had accepted Christ into her life, she immediately began to live her Christian witness by caring for Christ’s people, by showing hospitality. I’m convinced that just as God placed Lydia in Phillipi God has placed us in this community. We’re placed here for a reason. We need to be open as a church and as individuals to the Spirit’s guidance to find out how best to open our hearts and our home.

So the first European convert was not a Jew but a gentile, and a woman. Perhaps they saw this as a small and inauspicious beginning. Perhaps the things we try to do in this place, the things each of us does in our own lives, will seem small and insignificant. If we think so, we only have to look at the contrast again: Alexander had swept across Asia in the other direction like a forest fire. Paul and his friends, , began with this handful of gentile women. And yet Alexander’s kingdom has fallen to dust and the church of Jesus Christ is alive throughout the world.

Thanks be to God!