

Sunday February 9th, 2025

Acts 16:11-40

Series: "Lessons from the Early Church"

Sermon: "Visit to Philippi"

In the year 1870 the Methodists in Indiana were having their annual conference. At one point in the proceedings, the president of the college where the meeting was being held, stood at the podium and said, "I think we live in a very exciting age." The presiding bishop said, "What do you see?" The college president responded, "I believe we are coming into a time of great inventions. I believe, for example, that men will fly through the air like birds."

The bishop replied, "This is heresy! The bible says that flight is reserved for the angels. We will have no such talk here." After the conference, the bishop, who had made such a vicious stand against what the president of the college had said, went home. Yes, Bishop Wright went home to his two small sons, Wilbur and Orville. (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p. 362) And we all know what they did with their father's lack of vision.

One of the things that becomes immediately apparent about the early church is that they were believers who had vision. The Holy Spirit was clearly at work, directing their efforts to spread the gospel. These early believers expected visions to come, just as you and I might expect the sun to come up each morning. They longed for vision and prayed for it, and when visions came, they acted on them without hesitation. Often, as is the case in today's scripture lesson from Acts, the vision received seemed to the uninitiated to the faith, like a fool's errand.

The vision, in question, came to Paul during the night, in which a man in Macedonia pleaded with Paul to come to the region of Macedonia and help them. Understanding this vision was from God, Paul and his companions immediately boarded a ship in Troas and sailed for Neopolis and eventually traveling on to Philippi. Just like that. No debate, no resistance, Paul and his companions simply got on a boat and headed to Macedonia.

Reaching Philippi was a milestone for the church as Paul and his companions (namely Silas, Timothy and Luke), crossed over the river Dardanelles. The Dardanelles marks the border between Europe and Asia and so in Philippi, the gospel got its first hearing in Europe. Philippi was not a great city, but it was an historic one. 100 years before Paul set foot there, a great battle between a divided Roman army happened there.

Brutus who killed Caesar, on the Ides of March, and Cassius; fought for control over Rome against Anthony and Octavian. Anthony and Octavian ultimately win the war at the decisive battle near Philippi, and Octavian becomes Emperor taking the name Augustus. Because the people of Philippi had assisted Octavian's forces, the emperor rewarded them by making the residents of the city Roman citizens. It was a rare honour and was something the residents of Philippi took great pride in.

So, Philippi becomes a little colony of Rome, much like Hawaii is a state of the US. Not connected geographically, but nonetheless, still a part of the whole. So, Paul and company enter a Roman colony and begin by seeking out a synagogue. I mentioned before that this was Paul's usual approach. However, there is no synagogue in Philippi.

This is significant, because in Jewish law this meant there were few Jews present in the city. The Law of Moses dictated that if a town or city had at least ten Jewish household headed by a devout man, a synagogue must be created. No synagogue, therefore few families, if any. It is a disappointing start for the missionaries. Paul though knows the law well, and he knew that should there not be enough Jews to open a synagogue, provision was made that any devout Jews in the area should go to a nearby river or seashore to pray on the Sabbath.

So, Paul and the company head down to the nearby river to seek out devout people in prayer. Well, they found some folks in prayer, but surprise, surprise, it is a group of women. Not a Jewish man in sight, and the leader of this little group of women, Lydia, is a Gentile. Not a very promising missional opportunity for a group of men. I might have asked Paul, “Are you sure you really had a vision to come here”?

“One of them”. Not even the whole group, stayed to hear the missionaries out. Only Lydia stayed and she gave her heart to Jesus. Then she and her whole household were baptized. So, the gospel entered Europe through a women’s group. It was a slow start, but something good comes of it. Lydia was a rich woman. The purple cloth she sold was very expensive and lucrative. So, she ends up hosting the missionaries in her home.

The base of operations is not a synagogue, but the home of a devote Gentile. From Lydia’s home, the missionaries begin to share the gospel in Philippi, but frankly with little or no success. The missionaries don’t seem to be making any inroads here in Philippi. It must have been frustrating. Adding to the frustration was a slave girl who was possessed by a demon. The demon allowed her to be able to tell the future and her owners made a great deal of money off her misery.

In a similar way to what Jesus encountered in his travels, the demon begins to prompt the girl to declare publicly and loudly, that Paul and Silas are servants of the most high God. The intent here is that the demon is clearly taunting Paul and Silas. In an irritating fashion, this girl follows the two men around town, telling everyone at the top of her voice, that they serve God and have come to show them how to be saved.

You would think that Paul and Silas would take pity on such a girl in such circumstances. Her life was nothing but misery. She was exploited for the gain of others. However, Paul acts not out of pity or concern. This is good fodder for conversation. Instead, this young girl, so exasperated Paul that he finally called on Jesus to release her from the demon and put an end to her pestering.

This angered her masters, because the girl could no longer tell fortunes, and that meant their profits would be lost. Paul and Silas are then dragged to the marketplace, where often disputes were settled by the town elders, and they are accused of what? “They are teaching the people to do things that are against Roman customs.” Remember I said that the Philippians took great pride in being Roman citizens. Paul and Silas are then severely beaten and thrown in the darkest jail. We then have this great story of them singing and praying and then an earthquake happens destroying the prison gates.

The jailer awakes to find the doors busted open and fears his prisoners have escaped. He knows if his prisoners have escaped his life is forfeit, and his family is ruined. Therefore, he threatens to take his own life. Paul shouts out for him not to do that and then goes on to share the gospel with the jailer and his family. It is only the next day when Paul and Silas mention they are Roman citizens, are they released, and asked to leave Philippi, because the Philippians feared angering Rome. They did not want to jeopardize their special status.

Not a very auspicious start to the church in Philippi, but we know it did start, because Paul later writes a letter to them, which we have in the bible. The first converts to the Christian faith in Philippi were not what we might at first think were, very promising. Did you know in Paul's day that in some Jewish circles, the male head of a Jewish household upon rising, would pray his thanksgiving to God that he was not, "a gentile, a woman, or a slave"?

Paul himself may have even at one time prayed such a prayer. It is hardly coincidental that the first three converts in Philippi, in Europe, fall into these three categories. Paul has come a long way, hasn't he? Frankly, the church has come a long way. But I want to come back to the point about vision again. In human terms, the venture to Macedonia was fraught with challenges. Paul's usual strategies for outreach would not work.

We have no record of Paul preaching openly in public, only that he went down to the place of prayer, the river bank. Only the healing of the slave girl stirs things up, and Paul had no intention of healing her until she exasperated him to the breaking point. To me this whole enterprise seems haphazard. Yes, Lydia and the jailer become believers, but are there not easier ways, or a more receptive town Paul could have traveled to.

Well Paul and his companions were committed to one thing in all of this; no matter what happened, God was in charge. Paul and Silas had no script for any of this, they simply let the Spirit guide them. The events in Philippi were not haphazard to God, and I do not think it was for Paul and Silas either. I mean, if they really did not believe God was in control, how could they sing and pray after being severely beaten and jailed?

This passage challenges us to acknowledge that we are very uncomfortable with the unknown, with the unplanned. We long to have our lives scripted in detail. We don't like surprises. We expect that everyone else will fit into our nice, neat packages, and when they don't, we decide something is wrong with them. Churches are notorious for this kind of rigidity. But in early church it wasn't always so.

Often the gospel went to unexpected places in unexpected ways. The Holy Spirit went where the Holy Spirit wanted to go, and thanks be to God that people were invited to come along. The point is that a lot of what we think is important in the church, and in our lives, is not at all relevant in the bigger scheme of things.

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian of the nineteenth century, made a real habit of pointing out that so much of what goes on in the name of Christianity is ludicrous. His analogies of the church are stinging. One of the best stories he told was a group of men running around, setting up and testing a great array of deep-sea diving equipment.

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This crew of workers spends a great deal of time making sure everything works. Eventually the diver arrives. They dress him in a heavy suit. They test the oxygen pipes to make sure there is air getting to the diver. Then Kierkegaard drives the point home when he says, then they help the diver climb into a full bathtub and pull out the plug. (Stories that Feed the Soul, Tony Campolo, P.89)

All that preparation, all the effort, and for what? One could easily look at the early church's approach to mission and evangelism and think it was haphazard. Get a vision and go, doesn't seem like a strategic plan. In fact, if someone dared approach the ministry today in a similar way, we might be inclined to insist they go home and draw up a detailed proposal, including funding formulas, staffing levels, and administrative support.

Paul had none of this. He didn't even know where he was going to stay when he headed out. I know that planning is prudent, but I wonder sometimes if there is any room left for the moving of the Holy Spirit. I wonder where the whimsical joy of simply following has gone. I know that the modern church, here in the west, has adopted a businesslike approach to the church. Every year I go to our Baptist Assembly and hear about strategic plans.

As a church we talk about things like five-year goals, funding formulas, convert target levels, strategically aimed outreach, and marketing. I admit that sometimes at church conventions and seminars, I find myself thinking I am being trained for a job at Walmart. We can certainly dialogue about this, but I do not believe the church was ever supposed to work like this. In fact, in many parts of the developing world the church is growing at an incredible rate without most of the resources and strategies we take for granted.

What would have happened I wonder, if Paul had been a part of this church and stood up one Sunday and said, "God gave me a vision to go and bring the gospel to Macedonia?" How would we have reacted? What demands would we have made on Paul before we gave him our blessing? Could we have simply sent him off, and told anyone who wanted to go with him to join him? Honestly, it would be doubtful.

I don't want to convey that I am against careful planning but only wish to suggest that we have lost something from those early days of the church. We seem to be missing that sense of wonder and awe over what God is going to do next in our midst. In fact, I suspect that we do not even expect such surprises anymore. Part of the definition of grace is the implicit aspect that it is a surprise. Grace is something we did not expect.

Tony Campolo was discussing with a junior high group about what makes the Christian gospel unique. He tried to explain to them what grace was all about and then asked the group what made grace different from mercy and justice. One boy, with a smile on his face and a glint in his eye, answered by saying, "If a cop pulls you over for speeding and gives you a ticket, that's justice."

"If a cop pulls you over for speeding and gives you a warning, that's mercy. But if a cop pulls you over for speeding and gives you a Krispy Kreme donut, that's grace." (Stories to Feed Your Soul, p.27) Grace is unexpected, undeserved, and awe inspiring.

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I think the modern church is very good at dispensing justice, maybe far too good and far too quick with it. Sometimes we are adept at dispensing mercy, but how are we with giving grace. How are we at living by the grace of God? Paul had no idea what was going to happen at Philippi. I am sure he never foresaw meeting Lydia, or the demon possessed slave girl, or being beaten and jailed.

Maybe if he had known he might have reconsidered his trip there. But God called out to him and Paul responded. Paul embraced the surprising nature of God's grace and learned to lean on God no matter what might come upon him. I wonder if we can do the same.