

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 25, 2019

Gospel Openings

Acts 16:6-15

At the beginning of today's Scripture passage, some doors are closed and some are open. The Spirit had closed the door to preaching the gospel in Asia, so Paul and his missionary coworkers are now traveling in the region of Phrygia and Galatia. They eventually make it to the seaport city of Troas, where Paul has an epiphany. A man appears to him in a vision, begging Paul and his companions to come to the region of Macedonia with their message. This isn't a casual invitation. It's a plea for help, a plea for the gospel. Clearly, the Spirit is opening a door for the spread of the good news.

Paul wastes no time responding. "We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (v. 10). In one respect, the rest of Acts hinges on this text. The guidance of the Spirit, and the responsiveness of Paul and his fellow workers, becomes the occasion for a major step in the expansion of the church's message. Some doors close and other doors open, and in the process, God's saving purpose advances.

Not necessarily in military-like fashion, where brute force overcomes all barriers to the gospel. As one person has pointed out, in the book of Acts the church is not an "imperial juggernaut streaming its way to the ends of the earth."¹ On the contrary, the community of Jesus' followers often grows through means and circumstances that are surprising and unexpected. Granted, there are plenty of hindrances and hurdles. They come in different forms. Sometimes it's Gentile scorn or Jewish hostility. Sometimes it's weaknesses and disagreements within the fellowship itself. Sometimes it's social, racial, ethnic, or economic barriers. But over and over, the Spirit works creatively, using things that look like insurmountable obstacles or crippling limitations, to actually extend the reach of the good news and multiply the church.

In the second main section of today's text, the gospel crosses a gender barrier. After arriving in Philippi, Paul and his fellow church planters make their way to a makeshift synagogue, a "place of prayer" located on the edge of town, a place that Paul may have frequented while staying in Philippi. That's where he engages a group of Gentile women who are there for purposes of worship. It probably runs contrary to social custom for Paul, a Near Eastern male, to be talking to women in public. But remember that Paul is one of the leading figures in a religious community that has a growing reputation for being countercultural in many respects, including the ways it welcomes women and includes them in places of leadership. So we shouldn't be surprised that as the Spirit opens up new avenues for the gospel and adds to the fellowship of believers, that fellowship looks different from the traditional structures of first century society.

In this case, the Spirit's work comes in the form of Lydia. We don't have all the details of her spiritual biography, but we do know that she was a Gentile who had attached herself to the Jewish faith. Though she wasn't ethnically Jewish, she worshiped the Jewish God, without fully embracing or committing herself to the requirements of the Jewish law. Lydia

was also a successful businesswoman who sold a luxury product—purple cloth. She was a person of means and rank, and apparently the head of her household.

But in our text, the main thing that Luke wants us to know about Lydia isn't the kind of business she's in, but the kind of business the Spirit is in. In this case, the Spirit is in the business of opening Lydia's heart to hear and respond to the gospel, the news about a Jewish Messiah, a Savior who has come to redeem and restore God's people. Lydia's purple cloth may be destined for the rich and the royal in the Roman world, but now, by experiencing the good news, she comes to know the one who truly reigns, the crucified and risen Jesus. Her professional resume may be impressive, and her bank account full, but Lydia comes to see that without Christ, she is spiritually impoverished.

Again, she doesn't come to this realization on her own. As Luke puts it, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" (v. 14b, NRSV). So God, through the Holy Spirit, is doing business with this businesswoman, enabling her hearing and bringing her to faith in Jesus Christ. Here is a reminder to us that the work of Christian conversion is the work of God. Now that doesn't mean we can conclude, "Well, if that's the case, then I'll just step back, keep my mouth shut, and let God do God's work." No, our witness, our proclamation, in word and deed, is still an integral part of God's presence and work in the lives of others.

That doesn't mean we're the ones who bring the presence of God to others, as if he shows up when we show up. Notice that in our text, God was already present and working in Lydia's life, before Paul and his missionary coworkers arrived in Philippi. God isn't bound by or confined to our efforts at announcing the gospel. God is free to operate in ways that we may not have anticipated or expected, ways that we can't manipulate or control. And that's actually for our good and his glory, because it refocuses us on the fact that God the Holy Spirit is the one who converts non-believers and joins them to the people of God.

This also helps us cultivate patience in our Christian witness, because God's work of bringing someone to faith in Christ is often a patient work. In our evangelical stream of the Christian faith, we often give more attention and priority to conversions that are dramatic and instantaneous. We talk about the moment, or the day, when we or someone else came to faith in Christ and got saved. True, those kinds of experiences can be a significant way that God works to bring people into his kingdom. But for most people who profess faith in Christ, their experience of knowing him has been more like a journey than just a single moment. God worked patiently and purposefully, often across weeks or months or years, to open their heart and mind to the truth of the gospel and their need for the Savior.

When we remember that this is how God often works in people's lives, we can experience a certain freedom from thinking that it's up to us to convert someone, or to manage and manipulate the activity of the Spirit in their lives. In one edition of the *Peanuts* cartoon, Sally and Linus are leaving school when Sally informs him, "I would have made a good evangelist. You know that kid who sits behind me at school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion." "How'd you do that?" Linus wants to know. Sally answers, "I hit him with my lunch box."

Being a witness for Christ, and cultivating an evangelistic approach to life, doesn't require that we try to scare or intimidate people into a relationship with God. In many cases, being a faithful, evangelistic person means being open and available to participate in the patient work of the Holy Spirit in someone else's life, in ways that point them to Jesus, and to what God has done for us through him. That way, we rely less on our power, and more on God's power, to change people. And we do more than just get people to agree with a set of religious bullet points. We actually participate in their meeting and knowing the living Lord.

Author Donald Miller tells about how he once had misgivings about evangelism. But that was before his own faith deepened. He writes:

I could not in good conscience tell a friend about a faith that didn't excite me. I couldn't share something I wasn't experiencing. And I wasn't experiencing Christianity. It didn't do anything for me at all. It felt like math, like a system of rights and wrongs and political beliefs, but it wasn't mysterious; it wasn't God reaching out of heaven to do wonderful things in my life. And if I would have shared Christianity with somebody, it would have felt mostly like I was trying to get somebody to agree with me rather than meet God.²

Lydia was doing more than just agreeing with Paul. She was meeting, in an even fuller and deeper sense, the God who had already been present and working in her life, evoking praise and forming a community of people that would display the kingdom in the midst of the world.

And Paul was doing more than just presenting a riverside theological seminar aimed at recruiting new church members. There was a cartoon in a clergy journal that depicted a pastor standing before a sparse congregation in a large sanctuary. He declares, "God calls us to evangelism! The bank that holds our mortgage has mentioned it, too."³ Evangelism is about more than just getting additional people in the pews and making sure the church's bills are paid. It's most of all about the Holy Spirit using people like you and me to help people make the journey to faith in Christ.

And not just the journey to faith, but also the journey of faith. We see both in today's text. Lydia responds to the gospel and gets baptized, along with the members of her household. But she does more than that. She opens up both the door to her heart and the door to her home. She welcomes both the good news and the community of faith created by the good news. In other words, Lydia demonstrates her conversion through hospitality. Her residence becomes the spiritual center of Christian life in Philippi. In fact, she may have become a key leader, if not the key leader, of the Christian community in the city.

And all this because the gospel was on the move and the Spirit was at work, converting non-believers, and continuing to convert believers, so that their lives actually demonstrate the difference that Jesus makes. There's a well-traveled story that comes to us from the life of the great evangelist D. L. Moody. Moody was approached by a stumbling drunk on the street who slurred, "Mr. Moody, I'm one of your converts. To which Moody replied, "You must be, because you're certainly not one of the Lord's!"⁴

Every authentic convert to Christ is the Lord's convert, not mine or yours. But as the Spirit converts non-believers, and continues the conversion of believers, you and I have an important part to play in the ongoing story of God's saving purpose in the world. We're responsible for staying open to the guidance and leadership of the Spirit, so that we can spot openings for the gospel. Openings where we can speak the good news, and act the good news, so that people meet and experience Christ, and come to know him and trust him and follow him, together with others whom the Spirit is joining to the community of God's people.

¹ F. S. Spencer, quoted in Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles." *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) n.p.

² Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Nelson, 2003) 115-116.

³ Cartoonist Doug Hall in *Leadership*, Vol. 8, No. 1.

⁴ R. Ken Hughes, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Nashville: Crossway, 2015) n.p.