

052222 – Sermon

I retired from teaching back in 2011. I mean, I *retired!* I looked forward to time with my little grandchildren, time to pursue some hobbies, maybe some time to travel. I joined the Ottawa-Carleton Choristers, a choir mostly made up of retired teachers. I started a course to become a Licensed Lay Worship Leader – for two reasons: because I was interested and because I thought it would be helpful to the little rural church where I had been a member for about 40 years. So, I looked forward to some knitting, some singing, some learning, and some time to put my feet up and read novels instead of professional books. It was a lovely plan... but it seems God had a different plan in mind. There were nudges... There were taps on the shoulder... and before I knew it, I was working again in a whole new field, one I had never even considered, one that meant more years of study – and almost 10 years later, here I am, a United Church of Canada Minister serving at Bells Corners United Church. It was a path I had honestly never considered, but it was the right path for me. Has that ever happened to you?

We may think we know what we are doing – but sometimes God has other plans for us. That seems to have been the case for Paul who set out to take the gospel message to the people of Asia Minor, or Turkey as we now know it. Things kept happening to block his way. First there was an argument with Barnabas about who was welcome to join them – a disagreement that saw them parting ways – and then, in the few verses leading up to today's reading, we are told that the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus just wouldn't let him follow the path he thought he wanted to take. So frustrating!

Paul's tap on the shoulder in our reading today, came in the form of a vision or a dream. I can imagine him waking up in the morning and telling Silas and Timothy, "You won't believe the crazy dream I had last night!" A conversation over breakfast, perhaps. Paul probably expected everyone to laugh. "Too much wine last night, my friend? Stress getting to you?" They had already traveled a long way on their planned mission to Asia. They had already put in a lot of work toward this – hard work that seemed to keep putting them in front of closed doors. This mission was so important to Paul that he had parted ways with his friend and colleague to ensure it happened just the way he wanted it to go, with the right support from the right people. It would seem crazy to dismiss all that now because of a dream, wouldn't it?

But, what happened next changed everything. His friends didn't laugh. They didn't make light of his vision. They said, "OK! Let's go!" and they packed up and headed for Macedonia, to what we now call Greece – a whole new destination to them, a place they had never been and knew little about. They had no idea what lay ahead, but somehow it seemed like the right thing to do, the only thing to do – to drop the original plan, to take a risk, and to embark on a brand-new journey. Somehow, they all, not just Paul, knew that it was the right thing to do. It wasn't simply a dream; it was a call. There is a difference.

I recognize that feeling. Back in 2013, when I was focussed on retirement, someone suggested that there was an opening that seemed right for me. I brushed it off... but then I heard about it from two other sources as well. It only made sense to follow up and find out what this was all about. So, I did, and eventually accepted the CDM position here. I thought it would be interesting for a few years... Little did I know that this was not the end of it. There was nudging to do more, to follow another path, a path to full ministry. I remember the conversations at home during this time. I tried to convince myself... and Neil... that it didn't make sense – 5 more years of intense study, a lot of expense and travel... What was the point of doing all that when I would be close to 70 before I graduated? I already had a job I loved. I was heading to retirement, not a new career! But, like Paul, I was surrounded by people who saw past the roadblocks, people who knew that this was more than a passing dream; people who could see it was a call. People who said, "OK! Let's go!"

Sometimes being open to dreams and sharp turns on your life journey needs some support, people who are ready to say, "OK! Let's go!" Paul didn't head to Macedonia alone and I certainly didn't get to this place in my life without the help of others who shared in the vision and were willing to change course themselves to follow it through. Being open is not a solitary venture.

Paul and his friends had already traveled a long way – from Antioch to where we meet them in Troas alone was close to 600 km by foot. From there, they got into a boat, for a 2-day trip across the Aegean Sea, eventually landing in Neapolis, and then heading across land again to Philippi, about 16 km inland. The journey requested by Paul's vision was not an easy one. And when they got there, it

seems they weren't really sure where to begin. We are told they stayed in this Roman colony for several days but we hear nothing about meeting with the Macedonian man in Paul's vision, or about preaching and conversions. I wonder if they began to doubt their decision to follow this dream...On the sabbath they went looking for a place to worship. It's interesting that they headed to a riverbank outside the city. This tells us that there were no synagogues in Philippi, and indeed few, if any, Jewish men, as it requires 10 men to form a minyan or quorum for synagogue worship to take place. It was customary, in the absence of a synagogue, to gather together at a water's edge, and so that's where Paul went in hopes of finding people meeting for prayer. There, once again, the reality did not meet Paul's expectations. He found not men, but a group of women. This is where Paul meets Lydia.

I like Lydia. She is the kind of woman we would admire today. She was certainly not the kind of person Paul would be expecting to meet. She was not the Macedonian man who had pleaded with Paul in his vision to come and help. Not only was she female, but she wasn't even Greek – and she was far from what Paul would have considered an ordinary woman. She was a businesswoman, a merchant of purple cloth. She was independent and the head of her own household. Her clientele would have been only the very wealthy, and so we can assume she was a woman of means, a person of some wealth herself. She was a gentile, but someone we might call a Seeker – who felt drawn to the worship of God, but not yet part of a Jewish community of faith.

I doubt that Paul would have seen her and thought, "Ah! There's the person God wants me to meet!" I doubt that he would have approached her. After all, it would look pretty fishy if some strange men in town decided to strike up a conversation with a woman they didn't know. I think it was more likely Lydia who approached the men. She would have recognized Paul as a Jewish teacher, someone who would have answers to her questions, someone who could help her on her faith journey.

When you think about it, it's pretty amazing, that these two ever met there in Philippi. Paul was a Roman convert on a mission to Asia; Lydia was a gentile woman from Thyatira in an unusual position of independence and influence in Macedonia – both far from their home and culture. The social conventions of the time made it impossible for them to move in the same circles. And yet, somehow,

the answers to what they were each seeking were found in the most unexpected of places - because they were open to looking outside of the ordinary, open to moving outside of their comfort zones, open to seeing the opportunities God had placed in front of them.

Both Paul and Lydia had embarked on journeys to follow God, but neither was given a clear, easy path to follow. Paul had a lot of privilege in the world where he was born and raised but he still faced closed doors when he tried to take the gospel message where he thought it was needed. Lydia had little privilege as a woman and a foreigner in the world where she found herself and would certainly have faced many closed doors as she worked her way to the place and time we read about this morning. But closed doors didn't stop either Paul or Lydia. They were open to moving in a new direction, even when it meant taking a risk.

Being open to the call to turn in a whole new direction led Paul to someone who would not only hear the Good News of Jesus, but come to support his ministry and to form the beginnings of the Christian church in Europe. Strangely, this call to a brand-new path led Paul to Lydia from Thyatira in Asia, a place where he had not been allowed to go.

Being open to the call to enter into a relationship with God led Lydia to a riverbank in a city where there were not even enough Jews to start a synagogue – but a place where a stranger could open her heart to the Spirit she sought, and an opportunity to begin the work of support and hospitality that Jesus taught.

Both Lydia and Paul were open to listening to someone very different to themselves – different races, different genders, different classes, different economic status, different cultures, different calls.

One closed mind or heart would have changed this story completely – if Paul had seen the obstacles to his Asian mission as a sign to give up, if Silas or Timothy had laughed at Paul's vision, if the lack of a synagogue in Philippi had sent the men to a different city, if the danger of talking to a man, especially a stranger, had kept Lydia from approaching Paul, if Paul had refused to baptise a woman without a husband or male relative, if Lydia had not opened her home to them... One small opportunity missed or refused would have made all the difference.

How open are we to the opportunities in front of us? How often do we see a closed door as a barrier rather than a nudge in a new direction? How often do we hesitate to engage with others who are different from us – in race, or social status, or life-style, or religion, in even small things like age or appearance or address?

It would be so much easier if there were clear signposts or visions to set us on the path that we are called to follow – especially in times of transition. In our Lectionary Study this week, we talked about how transitions are most often times of real struggle. It's not easy to leave the familiar, even when the familiar isn't working anymore... and perhaps it's even harder to leave the familiar when it is a pretty comfortable place to be.

Christianity is not about following convention or preserving the status quo. It's about being open to feeling uncomfortable. Christianity is about change – change of heart, change of priorities. It's about being open to seeing the world from a new point of view, of being open to changing direction when we see that the old way isn't moving us toward the kind of world that God dreams for all of creation.

The message, as I see it in today's reading, is a call to being open... open to the possibilities that are before us if we open our hearts, open our minds, open our lives to God.

As a faith community, we have the support of those on the same journey. May we also have the courage to follow the way God leads, the courage to say, "OK! Let's go!"

Amen.