

6th Sunday of Easter (Year C)

Acts 16:9-15

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.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

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. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

My name is Paul. Well, my name used to be Saul but that was back when I was a terrible persecutor of the Christians. Now, my name is Paul and I am one. To make a long story short, I was walking along the road to Damascus one day when a big booming voice from the sky spoke to me, and I became blind, and then others took care of me and I began to believe in this Savior that I had been persecuting myself.

Now, my name is Paul. I'm a good guy. Well, I'm trying to be, at least. Now I'm traveling the world, preaching in the name of Christ, and trying to help people because, well, people have helped me. I have several traveling companions, and we've been making our rounds here and there. We had planned on going to a certain place but then I had this dream that I can't shake.

I was sleeping one evening, when I had this dream that I was standing at the edge of a river or some body of water. There was a shore on the other side, way off in the distance, and I saw another man standing upon it. He was yelling out to me, saying, "come over to Macedonia and help us."

I awoke the next morning, wondering what the dream meant. You see, I had planned on taking us to another place entirely; Macedonia was way out of our way. I mean way, way out of our way. Until now, we had been way over in what you would call the Middle East. Macedonia was in what you would know as northern Greece, in Europe. It was a long way away.

I pondered over the dream as I had my morning breakfast. There was a part of me that really wanted to ignore this dream, to dismiss it as a random thing with no significance. But, the more I thought about it, I realized that that was Saul talking. You see, Saul had never had much respect for, or belief in, the Holy Spirit. Saul did his own thing. Saul marched to the beat of his own drum. Saul cared for no one but himself. But I am no longer Saul. I am Paul. And Paul has learned that the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways.

So, I decided that we would go to Macedonia. I decided to trust that the Holy Spirit was calling us to travel to a place where the Gospel was needing to be heard.

We traveled long and hard. We traveled by boat to arrive in Philippi, which was the capital of Macedonia. When we got there, I was really worried. We didn't know anyone. We were strangers in a strange land. We listened around and heard through the grapevine that a bunch of people gathered for prayer outside the city gate by the river. There were a bunch of women by the riverside and we befriended them and preached the gospel to them.

I told them my story of how I was a terrible person who persecuted men, women, and children who were Christians. I told them about how I went on numerous trips and brought back Christians bound for Rome where they stood trial for sedition and treason. The women's eyes widened as they listened to my tale. I'm sure they were wondering whether this was a trick or not. Maybe they were wondering who was *really* talking to them: Paul or *Saul*?

But then I got to the part of the story where my name changed to Paul and I was led by the Holy Spirit to become a part of the very movement I had been persecuting. I told them about this dream that I had of the man beckoning me to come to Macedonia. I told them about our long journey here.

One woman, whose name was Lydia, was particularly moved by my story. She was a very wealthy business woman, having been trained as a dealer in purple cloth. I don't know if you know but purple cloth was the most expensive type of cloth so this Lydia woman must have been a very talented business woman.

Lydia was so moved by my testimony of God's grace that she asked us if we would baptize her and her entire family. I guess she wanted to be a part of such a story, too. It was such a joyous moment. You see, I and my traveling companions had been so worried about this random direction that the Holy Spirit was guiding us in. Macedonia was far, far away from our home and many of us had never traveled so far away. Would God guide us even here? Would the Holy Spirit be our protector even in this far away land?

Well, our answer was in the form of this young, newly baptized disciple named Lydia. She showed us such tremendous hospitality. In fact, as soon as we were done baptizing Lydia and her family in the very river by which we met her, she invited us to stay with her and her family. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we had found hospitality in a far away land.

Thanks to her graciousness, we now had a place to stay while we continued to minister to and with the people of Macedonia. Thanks to Lydia's faithfulness and hospitality, the message of Christ - a message of grace, welcome, and forgiveness - is now being spread all throughout Europe. In fact, if you didn't know already, Lydia was the very first Christian convert on the whole continent of Europe!

As I was sitting down at the table with Lydia and her family, I wondered what would have happened if I had not paid attention to that dream of the Macedonian man begging us for help. Perhaps the gospel would never have reached the shores of Europe. Since we have begun our stay here in Philippi, we have baptized hundreds of people and even more have begun to believe in the name of Jesus Christ. We haven't been "forcing" anyone to believe - that is not the way of Christ. Instead, we have been demonstrating the hospitality that has been shown to us by Lydia and her family. Then, demonstrating hospitality becomes, instead, an invitation. And people are much more likely to accept an invitation than to acquiesce to a demand!

So, most of our days, we have breakfast with Lydia and her family. It is a delight to continue to get to know them as we go about our mission. Then, after breakfast, I and my companions, walk the streets, getting to know people where they are, instead of expecting them to come to where we are comfortable. Then after a long day of preaching and sharing stories with one another - and perhaps a couple baptisms - we return to Lydia's table and break bread together. In fact, we break bread as Jesus taught us to do so, remembering his death and resurrection. Together, we pass the cup - I, my companions, Lydia, and her family - and we remember the cup of salvation, the blood of Christ that was shed for all of our sins!

It's interesting, isn't it, how hospitality begets hospitality? It is only through the hospitality of Lydia and her family that we have been able to show Christian hospitality to others in the area of Philippi.

My prayer for you - whoever you are reading this diary at this moment - is that you would hear this testimony and come to believe. I would pray that you come to believe that the Risen Christ is doing a new thing in the world and I would pray that you not be afraid to take part in it. I pray that you would be able to go out of your comfort zone to discover the unexpected places where Christ's hospitality will find you.

You see, this thing we call discipleship is a wild and precious journey. It takes us from what we are used to and transports us to unfamiliar places where we find a familiar grace. Sure, I had never been to Macedonia or Philippi. However, I sure did recognize the hospitality that was shown us by Lydia and her family. It was the hospitality that was first shown to me when I was on the road to Damascus and I was struck blind and had to be led back home and cared for for several days. I've received that hospitality. And I believe it is my duty to reciprocate it.

So, who knows, maybe one day you and I might find ourselves at the same Table. Perhaps we will gather by the Table at Christ's invitation. Perhaps we will be convinced by the Holy Spirit to listen to our dreams and follow them to where God is leading us.