

“Led by the Spirit” – Acts 16:9-15 – June 2, 2019

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

As we continue through the Season of Easter, today we catch the Apostle Paul at the beginning of his second missionary journey. Leading up to this lesson from Acts, Paul kept running into road blocks. He had a falling out with his traveling companion Barnabas, and they parted ways. Paul commissioned Silas to travel with him, and soon Timothy joined as well. With new travel buddies, Paul’s goal was to preach the gospel in Asia, but every time Paul and his companions started off in that direction, they felt God’s Spirit turning them another way. He was getting frustrated by the distractions. Then one night, Paul had a vision of a man calling him to come to Macedonia. Paul was startled, as Macedonia was in Europe. He had not planned on going there, but he believed this vision was an authentic call from God. So, Paul and his new companions began their journey.

In the church we often talk about discerning God’s Spirit. Stories like Paul’s and others throughout the bible show us that our first instinct to do something is not always the right one. Or maybe we find ourselves going in a particular direction, but run into situations that compel us to turn a new way. I think of my call to ministry. As a Southern Baptist, I was having a really difficult time finding opportunities to serve the church. Doors kept closing, mainly because I was a woman – not something I could easily change. The situation seemed a dead end, and I gave up trying to become a Baptist minister. Then through a series of nudges and pushes and pulls, I found myself headed in a surprisingly new direction with the Presbyterians. After years of closed doors, a new path opened on my journey toward ordination. One I had never even contemplated.

Discernment of God’s will is not so easy to explain. There is no general formula of how discernment comes about, other than be open to the leading of God’s Spirit. Discernment doesn’t happen because someone has a great idea to do something, and then off we go. Discernment comes about through intentional connection with God. It’s having an openness to God’s leading. It comes by reading scripture, by studying it and learning about who God is and what God desires for our world and the people in it. It comes through prayer – which is simply conversation with God. Not just talking to God, but also listening to God in moments of silence. Discernment comes through living out the model of Christ – of understanding how Jesus treated people and intentionally doing that in our own lives – through kindness, compassion, mercy, love. When we are attuned to God, and to how God works in the world, that’s when discernment happens.

Paul and companions arrived in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia. The city didn't not have a synagogue, so any Jews in the area would gather at the river on the Sabbath for worship. So, on the Sabbath, Paul and his friends headed toward the river in search of worshippers.

They found a group of women gathered at the river to pray. No other men were in attendance. There they met a Gentile named Lydia. She was described as one who worshipped God, meaning she was interested in the teachings of Judaism and actively sought to have a relationship with God. Lydia was a merchant, a dealer in expensive purple cloth. She was eager to hear the message that Paul brought with him about Jesus Christ. The text tells us that God was already at work within her, by opening her heart to hear Paul's message. Recognizing the truth in Paul's words, Lydia eagerly received the message of the gospel.

Her immediate response was to share this good news with her entire household, bringing them to be baptized. She wanted to share this truth of Christ with those she loved and for whom she cared. And then she immediately offered hospitality to Paul and his companions. In her gratitude to them, she opened her home to them and refused to take no for an answer. At a later time, after Paul and Silas had been freed from prison (and that's a whole other story), they returned to Lydia's home. At this point, she was not only offering hospitality to these guests, but her home had become a house church right there in the city of Philippi. House churches were an important part of the early growth of Christianity.

In Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, we read that Paul had a very close connection to the Christians there. He was very grateful for their financial and prayerful support of his mission throughout Macedonia and beyond. This church was especially important to Paul, and though Lydia is not mentioned by name in that letter, it would not be surprising to me if her generous hospitality and solid leadership were the root of that relationship between Paul and the church.

Considering that the first century was a very male-dominated culture and society, I am always grateful to read these scripture passages that highlight the powerful women who helped to form and lead the early Christian Church. For those of you who appreciate trivia, Lydia has the distinction of being the first European convert to Christianity. Her response to the gospel is instructive for us. First, she was open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Her heart was ready to hear the message that Paul brought. Of course, Paul himself had been open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, when, instead of pursuing his goal of journeying to Asia, he followed the words of the vision, that brought him to Macedonia.

When she became a follower of Christ, Lydia shared that message with everyone who was important in her life, all those family, friends and servants who comprised her household. Furthermore, she responded with hospitality, not only welcoming the messengers into her home, but later, opening her home to all the believers in the community so that they had a place to worship and come together.

The receptiveness of both Lydia and Paul to the leading of the Holy Spirit in their lives should be models to us as we try to live as disciples. If we keep our focus on Christ and remain open to the leading of his Spirit, then we will have a better chance of discerning God's will for our lives and our ministries in this community and in the world.