

Paul and Lydia

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening everyone. My name is Heidi Mills and I use her pronouns and I currently serve as the Director of Community here at the table and I just want to thank Pastor Tanetta right after that for creating the space for us to even just briefly talk about something that is very triggering for many of us and that can bring up a lot of complex emotions and if there's one thing I've learned it's that we don't leave our lives behind when we come into this church space and as I preach I just want to try as best as I can to hold the complexity of the emotions that we are bringing into this space. I'll do my best and I thank Pastor Tanetta again for just creating that space.

So today I'm going to be concluding our series on the book of Acts and I have grown to really love this book because it is so clear to me that the early church kind of didn't know what it was doing.

The heart was in the right place and they tried to follow and do a few footsteps but really they were flying by the feet of their pants the entire time. Like us they were trying to create something new in a time of chaos and they were trying to live into the answers to a few questions. What does it look like to be called together as the church? What are we supposed to do and how are we supposed to do it?

And Jesus to his credit does try to give us an answer to that question. He tried several times. So I want us to revisit Acts chapter 1 verse 6. This takes place right before Jesus ascends to heaven.

He declares to his disciples, but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you'll be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all of Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Jesus' words here contain both a promise and a promise. First, he promises that the disciples, he promises to the disciples that the Holy Spirit will come upon them. And this promise is fulfilled at Pentecost when the spirit like rushing winds and blazing fire descends upon the gathered crowd and suddenly they are able to understand one another as though they were speaking in their native language. And later, Peter interprets this event as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel 2 which says that the Holy Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. So in Acts chapter 1, Jesus was speaking to his disciples. But we know that the promise of the Spirit extends to every single one of us today. The story of Acts is fundamentally a story about the Holy Spirit. The early followers discovered that the Holy Spirit shows up in the people they least expect. Two weeks ago, Pastor Tanetta preached about the Ethiopian unit. And last week,

[3 : 0 4] Pastor Rallone preached about Cornelius the Centurion. At first, these people appeared to, they couldn't be more different from one another. But in one respect, they are the same. We have both been excluded from the promises of God. The Ethiopian unit was considered other because of his race and his status existing outside of the gender binary. Cornelius, though he possessed great power and privilege in Rome. Peter refused to even dine with him because he thought that he would become unkinked.

Both Peter and Philip needed to recognize that the Spirit was big enough and powerful enough to include them both. We do too. Over the years, the church has become an expert at building walls to keep certain people in and other people out. If people don't fit the mold, if they don't love the right people, if they don't believe the right things, they are seen as other, as lost, and people in need of saving.

There is a gate into the kingdom of heaven, as they say, and only a few are allowed to enter. And this is where the second part of Acts chapter 1 verse 6 comes in. Jesus calls us, meaning his followers, be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. Now for most of my life, this verse has been used as a call to evangelize. Growing up, I was taught, and maybe some of you were as well, that we are currently in the end times, and Jesus would return any day now. Except the only thing that stopped Jesus from coming back and making all things right is the fact that not everybody has heard about him yet. So it was up to us, to save, to go into the remote parts of the world and tell them all about Jesus, to give them the chance to repent and believe the good news. Some of us probably have some trauma surrounding this idea of evangelism, because it has caused a lot of harm over the years. We only have to look so far as the history of this nation to see that this is true. White European Christians justify the subjugation, oppression, and genocide of indigenous peoples with the doctrine of manifest destiny, or this idea that

God gave them the right to expand into new territories and spread the gospel, to be a city on a hill. Indigenous peoples were stripped of their land, their customs, and their culture in the name of Christ.

And to this day, they are learning to heal and rebuild after the trauma of residential schools, with a push to convert indigenous children to Christianity, with purity but attempts to assimilate them into whiteness. The same is true for enslaved Africans, who are bombarded with a version of Christianity that denies their right to freedom. Unfortunately, spreading the gospel and being a witness to Christ has often been paired with a desire to dominate, to oppress, to colonize, and to enslave.

[5 : 57] I have personally seen how this desire to witness for Christ looks a lot more like forcing everybody into looking and behaving just like me. I remember back in middle school and high school of being this bright-eyed, good-a-teach-teach Christian who eagerly told anyone who was not a Christian that they were going to hell and it was my responsibility to save them. But this form of salvation looked an awful lot like making sure people believed all the right things and did all the right things. It never looked a whole lot like freedom and it never sounded like good news. I am still in the process of learning how to separate this idea of being a witness for Christ from the harm that has been caused. And I would not fault anyone sitting here today or listening online if you struggle with this idea of evangelism. However, I do still believe that the good news needs to be shared. The only thing is that it's not up to us to force people to accept our own particular version of Christianity. In today's main passage, we are going to see how Paul struggled to accept that it was the Holy Spirit leading this journey and it was not himself. Please turn in your Bibles if you have it online or if you thought it was going on. I don't know if anyone does that these days. Maybe we do. But we will be reading Acts chapter 16 verses 6-15. The words will be will not be on the screen but I'll be reading from the NRCD if that helps you follow along. But before I read this passage, I did want to lay out very briefly some context because we have skipped over a lot of chapters in between last week and this week. Last week also meant I already mentioned Cornelius. And after the conversion of Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius, the Jews in the church were trying to determine what it meant that Gentiles are included in the promises of God. In Acts chapter 10 verse 45, the Spirit is in fact poured out on the Gentiles and they are baptized in the name of Christ. But they were trying to figure out what that looked like. And one of the key figures in our Bible comes up here. In chapter 13, we pick up the story of Paul. For those of you who may not be familiar,

Paul used to be a persecutor of the Christian church before becoming a follower of Jesus after an encounter on the Damascus road. And Paul later becomes known for this mission to the Gentiles.

And so Paul goes to Jerusalem along with a lot of the other church leaders at this time and they have a council. Even in the first century, followers of Christ love their council. And during this council, they decide that the Gentiles are in fact welcoming this community. They do oppose some restrictions on that as they do. They came up with some rules that Paul actually takes issue with later.

But the key thing in this council is that there's now going to be missions to the Gentiles, that they are going to bring the Gentiles into this new community and welcome them. So Paul picked up a new missionary partner, Timothy in Lystra and they decide to go around visiting churches in Asia Minor, what we now call churches. And this kind of had a twofold purpose. One, they wanted to go and see how the churches were doing, the churches that Paul had founded. But then they also wanted to get the word out about this new decision that they had made about the Gentiles being included. And we pick up the story in Acts chapter 16 starting in Bistar. They, meaning Paul, Silas, and Timothy, went into the region of Phrygia and Galatea, having been forbidden by the Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Silas. During the night, Paul had a vision. There stood a man of

Macedonia, feeding with him and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us. When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to talk over to Macedonia, being convinced that God has called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Semerathrace.

[10 : 40] The following day, to Neopolis and from there to Philippi, which is the leading city of the district 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 gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us. She was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer of 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.

So before I go any further, I did want to put a map up on the screen of this journey, because I think it's kind of helpful to picture what this looks like. It's kind of hard when you just have a bunch of places thrown at you. And another reason why I want to do this is because I recently actually traveled to Houston, Turkey last month as part of a post-graduation trip with my seminary. And I've been begging to be able to share some of the journey with you. So I hope you'll bear with me with some pictures and stuff like that. So we basically traveled the same route as Paul did, only a bit in reverse. First started in Corinth, went all the way up to Greece, went down, and then we ended in Philippi, actually. And then we went into Turkey and down to Ephesus, Pergamum, that area. And it was an incredible trip, because we were literally walking in the same footsteps as Paul. We stayed in a town called Cavalla, which is in modern time, which was in Paul's time rather known as Neopolis. So from our hotel room, we could see the harbor where Paul likely steps up in Greece. If we could take that picture up. Yeah. And so it's like not exactly, but it was able to give an idea of where Paul may have first landed in Greece. And from there, we traveled along the what's called the Via Agnicea, which is the road that connects Asia Minor and Europe.

It also connected Neopolis to Philippi. So the next picture is actually the Via Agnicea in Philippi itself. And in Philippi, we also saw Paul and Titus' prison cell. You can learn more about that in Acts chapter 17.

But outside of all of that, the reason why this passage means so much to me is because we later went outside the gate of the city and remembered our baptism on the same river where Lydia was baptized.

That's the river where people believe Lydia was baptized. And we, going on this journey, had the benefit of knowing how Paul's faithfulness takes away for our own journey. But Paul did not know that. Paul had other plans. He intended to travel into Phrygia and Galatea, likely to preach the gospel. But the Holy Spirit said no. Then he wants to go to Bethesda, and the Holy Spirit says no again.

[14:18] And this doesn't really make much sense. If we're supposed to spread the gospel, to be God's witnesses to the ends of the earth, then why would the Spirit stop them from going anywhere? And what's frustrating about this is that we're not even given an explanation. Here Paul is. He's trying to follow God's will, and he runs straight into a brick wall for no good reason. And anyone who has ever run into an obstacle, a closed door, if you will, knows what Paul felt in that moment. I know very well what Paul felt.

There have been so many moments in my life where I have believed wholeheartedly that I was following God's will. I tend to be the type of person that gets it into my head that there's only one right way to serve God, one proper path ahead of me. And if I miss that path, like it's all over, I'm done, I can't want to serve God anymore.

One example of several is that a couple years ago, I applied for an internship here in the city, and I was sure that it was exactly what God had called me to do. Everything about it felt right.

Until that moment when I was rejected from that internship, and I was devastated. How could I have been so wrong about something? How could I have so completely misunderstood God's will for my life?

I could have so many times. This would not be the first time, nor would it be the last, that I encountered a closed door. But this closed door made me realize something very important. Sometimes, following the Spirit requires letting go of our own agendas.

[16:01] A closed door did not mean that I was wrong for wanting to serve God in that way. Paul was not inherently wrong for wanting to go into Phrygia, Galatea, or Vithynia.

All it meant for both of us, what it meant for me, was that God was calling me to leave behind my own agenda to see what God was doing. I didn't keep up on my desire to serve God. Instead, I just needed to let go of my own particular idea of what that was like.

There are certain times when God calls us to let go of those relatively harmless agendas, like wanting a certain job or wanting to go to a certain place. But then, there are also times when our personal agendas, when linked closely with the gospel, become not only distracting, but actually dangerous.

Our agendas can get so wrapped up in our faith that we can't see where one ends and the other begins. The worst example is when following Christ becomes synonymous with promoting empire.

Christ gets used and abused to justify all manner of evil. Racism, sexism, homophobia, untextualism and greed, violent nationalism, the list goes on and on.

[17:18] The language of faith gets co-opted to justify domination and control. It is used to subjugate and oppress rather than liberate. It locks the gate shut and it throws away the king.

But following the spirit requires us to subjugate and domination. And Paul, going back to his story, he had the choice to continue with his own agenda.

As a Pharisee, Paul in fact used those tools of domination and control to enact his own will. And he found that he was following God through all of that.

And likewise, in Rome, Paul was also a Roman tradition. And he was well acquainted with the way that Rome often used this idea of power and privilege to colonize and to make everyone follow in line with what Rome was doing.

So Paul could have done that. He could have gone on his own way and no one would have been any of the wiser. But Paul chose to follow. And when he makes this decision to not go in a certain way, the spirit gives him additional direction.

[18 : 32] In a dream, a Macedonian man appeared to him and asked for help. But when he arrived in Philippi, one of the leading cities in Macedonia, he didn't meet a Macedonian man.

He met a Macedonian woman, Lydia. Even in that moment, the spirit was urging Paul to let go of his own ideas about following Christ.

He expected one thing and he got another. During his time in Philippi, Paul needed to cross some boundaries. This story reveals another integral thing about what it means to follow the spirit.

Following the spirit tells us beyond the gate. In verse 12, we read that Paul and Silas remained in Philippi for some days, but we don't read anything about them proclaiming the gospel right away.

Maybe they weren't quite sure what to do. How were they going to find a Macedonian man in the middle of one of the biggest cities in Macedonia? How did they know what they were looking for?

[19 : 38] And it was also likely that there was no synagogue in Philippi. And usually the synagogue would be Paul's first step on this train. So they were kind of trying to figure out what to do, maybe wasting a little bit of time.

But then on the Sabbath day, they decided that they would go outside the city gates and see if the Jewish community was worshipping there. Because they did that sort of thing in other cities. And there they met women, including Lydia.

Maybe men were present. The story doesn't really tell us. This early Jewish community did not always segregate their worship services by gender. But the fact that they only mentioned women could be a sign that only women bothered to listen.

And foremost among those women is Lydia. So when Paul preached the gospel to the gathered crowd, the Holy Spirit was already there, just waiting for Paul to catch up.

We read in this passage that Lydia was already a worshiper of God, before Paul even showed up on the scene. Yet Lydia was, in many ways, the last person anyone would ever expect to fall apart.

[20 : 50] It was a bit of a three-strike-to-near-out scenario. She was a woman, she was a Gentile, and we know from the fact that she dealt in purple cloth as she was a virgin. But she had the one thing that was necessary, this year.

She opened her heart to listen to what Paul had to say, because a part of that message was already inside her. And this is where our idea of missions so often falls short.

Too often, missions work has been framed in these terms. We have God, you don't. Therefore, we need to go to you and tell you all about our God.

Because you can only know and experience God through us. The Holy Spirit changes all of that. In Hebrew, the word for spirit is ruach.

We've mentioned that in other sermons in the past. But we've also mentioned, and maybe if you're on here for the first time, you haven't heard this. But the word for ruach is a feminine term.

[21 : 55] It's used to describe the spirit hovering over the waters at creation. And the spirit was there when everything came into being. Just as Paul expected a Macedonian man and encountered a Macedonian woman, we also often expect this inert, passive spirit that we can kind of like use to justify anything that we want to do.

But instead, the spirit is blazing with her divine freedom. The spirit cannot be defined. The spirit is like a rushing wind, going where she pleases, breathing life and freedom and joy and power wherever she goes.

The spirit washes over all people. The spirit is all around us, shattering expectations, breaking down barriers, making a way where there is no way.

When we dare to go beyond the gates, we find the Holy Spirit who is already doing far more than we could ask or imagine. Paul and Silas and Timothy thought that they were going to proclaim the gospel to the Philistines.

Instead, they discovered a woman who proclaimed the gospel to them, not just with words, but with action. To her example, her entire household was baptized.

[23 : 16] And by the way, there's no mention of a husband in this passage at all. So she was the head of her household. And she was the one who inspired them to be baptized into the community of God.

Lydia showcased a faithful hospitality when she invited Paul and his missionary partners into her home. She extended the table wider, making space for everyone to eat their fill, and she would not take no for any answer.

And there, on that river, in Lydia's home, something special began in Philippi. Something Paul could have probably imagined when he was first told no by the spirit.

The letter Paul writes to the Philistines later becomes one of the most joyous sections in all of Scripture, despite the fact that Paul writes it in prison.

In Philippians chapter 1, verses 3-6, Paul writes these words, I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

[24 : 37] I am confident in this, that he who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. I can feel the gratitude and the love keeping up the page in these words that Paul writes.

And it all started with Lydia. To her, the good news of Christ burst out of the gates and into the world. And the good news that began in Philippi continues through us today.

When Paul gathered Lydia's household by the river and baptized each of them in turn, it was a visible sign of the work of the Spirit. Baptism is this reminder that we are all followed together by the Spirit into one community.

And this baptism of Lydia is so transcendent to me because I have stood on those banks where Lydia was baptized. On my trip, every single day that we spent in Greece was picture perfect.

There was sunshine, there was hardly a cloud in the sky, perfect weather. But as we were leaving Philippi and going to this site, a thunderstorm threatened to approach.

[25 : 55] And we did our best to outrun it, but we failed miserably. Don't know if anybody here has gotten caught in a D.C. thunderstorm, but trying to outrun it is a leading game.

And it was the same here. As we all sat down by the river, the wind picked up, whistling through the trees so loudly that we could barely hear one of my favorite professors talk about this very story.

She held in the power of women. She urged us to remember Lydia, who was sweet enough and bold enough to say yes to the life that she wanted. She urged us to remember her spirit, her love, her heart, her faithful witness to God, and remember that we stand in her legacy.

We are here because of her faithfulness. And she talked about baptism, the great cleansing of the waters. Maybe some of you were baptized as infants, others of you as adults.

Maybe some of you have not been baptized at all, and that's okay. But this act of being baptized, of being cleansed by the waters, reminds us that we are part of this new community, reborn by the power of the Spirit.

[27 : 14] We were dead, and now we are alive. It is grace only, always, and during the service, I looked out at the gathered crowd.

All of us on the trip came from different walks of life. We were all, at some point, called to seminary to witness to the gospel of Christ. And we were empowered by the Spirit.

None of us were the same. Some of us were young. Others of us were old. Some had families. Others didn't. Some of us had been ministering for years. And others of us were just starting out.

Still, each of us were the same as we stepped forward. We reached out our hands to dip our fingers into a bowl of water in the resting river. But as our hands touched that water, the heavens opened up, and we were drenched.

And this is one of my favorite memories of the trip, because it reminds me that the grace and the power of the Holy Spirit always overflows, and always breaks through.

[28 : 20] We expected to dip our hands into this stagnant river water in the bottom of a bowl, but instead we experienced the downpour of God's grace.

The Holy Spirit has been poured out on all people like a thunderstorm breaking across a summer sky. And this brings me back to our mission.

Our mission is not to try to contain the grace of God, to put it into easily the visible rules, and package it for easy obedience. Our mission is not to the walls of our human time and experience the cleansing downpour of God's grace, pouring over all people, filling us with power and strength and love.

Our mission is not to coerce or subjugate people into the ideal vision of what a Christian should be, or use our faith to justify our own will to dominate. Instead, our mission is to follow the Spirit, free wherever she goes, outside of the gate, and see what she is doing in the world.

Because she is up to some extraordinary things and she wants us to participate in what she is doing. Our mission is to experience the power of the Holy Spirit like a sudden downpour.

[29 : 37] Our mission is to shatter those gates and bring everybody into this community where all are welcome to this grace. It is only ever grace that welcomes us into this new community.

and when you follow this mission, you will truly be God's witnesses here in deep and to the end of the earth. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, I thank you for bringing us into this space. I know that your Spirit is with us, just working in us and through us and around us, working in the work of the earth that can seem so dark and so unbearable sometimes.

I pray that we will experience your presence, your goodness, Lord, that we will encounter this freedom of the Spirit that calls us beyond the gates, that calls us to promote liberation and freedom, Lord.

If for anyone who is struggling, if for anyone who is feeling lost or confused or angry or anyone who is in mourning, Lord, I pray that as we move through our weeks, as we move through our days, that you will just remember that you always come passing down around us like grace.

[31 : 04] Nothing's like grace. Nothing but grace. I pray that we will experience that grace in all that we do, Lord, and that we will be empowered to see how that grace is working in ways that you can clearly imagine and be a part of it.

And here is his name. Amen.