

“Come to My House”

Acts 16:9=15

Sunday, May 9, 2010—Sixth Sunday in Easter

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The Book of Acts is, on the one hand, a history of how the early Christian movement grew and spread in the years following the resurrection. But Luke’s primary purpose wasn’t to write a history book. Luke was interested in one question: what does it mean to be the church of Jesus Christ? This question is particularly important for us today, because so many people today seem to feel that church is an optional part of the Christian life. The book of Acts boldly challenges the notion that you can be a Christian without meaningful involvement in Christian community. As we reflect, during this post-Easter season, on what it means to be Christ’s disciple, Luke tells us that question is inseparable from the question of what the church is to be do and be.

In this morning’s reading, Paul and his colleagues find themselves in Philippi, a Roman colony. Apparently it wasn’t their first choice as a place to spread the Gospel. They had plans to go to elsewhere, but the Holy Spirit put the kibosh on those plans and directed them to Macedonia instead.

Paul’s usual practice, when he got to a new place, was to show up at the local synagogue, but apparently there wasn’t any building devoted to the worship of God in Philippi. Instead, local Jews were known to gather for prayer and study at the side of a river outside the city, so that’s where Paul goes. There he finds a group of women, including Lydia. We don’t know much about Lydia, but here’s what we do know. She was a successful businesswoman. She lived in Thyatira, a city well known for its textile industry, and she deals in purple cloth. Purple is the color of royalty. Lydia’s customers were the rich and famous, the movers and shakers of the Roman world. And Lydia is identified as a worshiper of God, which probably means she was someone on the fringes of the Jewish community.

Lydia listens to Paul and she is converted. She and her entire household were baptized. And then, first thing she does, she turns to Paul and the others and she says, “Come and stay at my house.” Lydia’s response to Christ’s welcome is to extend that same welcome to others. Just as welcoming strangers and outsiders was the heart of Jesus’ ministry, so welcoming strangers and outsiders is at the heart of the mission and purpose of Christ’s church.

In his book on faithful practices of fruitful congregations, Methodist Bishop Robert Schnase tells a story about his work as a student pastor at a local hospital. He was called to the emergency room to support an older man whose wife of many years had suffered a sudden heart attack. They had been eating lunch at a restaurant after finishing their grocery shopping when she was stricken. She was rushed by ambulance to the local hospital, where she was pronounced dead on arrival. All of this happened within the space of an hour or two on a day that had begun in a completely ordinary way, and the man was utterly stunned with grief. Schnase asked the man if he could call his pastor. He did not have a pastor, because he attended no church. Could he call a family member to come and take the man home? No; the family was scattered across the country, living hundreds of miles away. Could he call a co-worker, perhaps? The man had retired years before; there were no co-workers. What about a neighbor? The man and his wife had lived

in their apartment complex for three years and did not know the names of their neighbors. Schnase prayed with the man, handed him an envelope containing his wife's wedding ring, glasses and necklace, walked with him to the parking lot and watched him drive off alone to cope on his own with the events of the day. (*Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, p.19). It brought to mind my own experience in a large Chicago hospital on the night I was called to minister to a young gay man whose partner had fallen or jumped from a thirtieth floor balcony into the river below. The ER nurses located the dead man's parents in a distant city and called them on the telephone. The nurses then offered the phone to the dead man's partner, only to learn that the family wanted nothing to do with him. He, too, left the hospital to grieve and cope alone, knowing he wouldn't even be welcome at his partner's funeral.

Life is not meant to be that way. From the beginning God has said, it is not good for us to be alone. We are created to live in relationship with others. The church is the practicum for learning how to live in God-pleasing relationships. We at Vernon Church are a community that rallies around one another in times of sickness, grief, misfortune, and worry. We hold each other up in prayer. We visit the sick and shut-in. We share each other's joys and we come alongside those who are going through hard times. Sure, it's possible to be part of the church and walk alone through such events, but if we do, it's usually because we've chosen to do so. I don't believe that's God's intention, not for any of us. The sharing of joys and burdens between brothers and sisters in Christ is at the heart of what it means to a Christian community. We are called by Jesus Christ to share these blessings we have received with those who have yet to receive them. We are called to welcome the stranger. We are to go to the world outside the church and say, in the words of Lydia, come to my house. Come and stay.

Most mainline Protestant churches, including ours, are not doing this very well. Part of the problem, I think, is that we tend to think of church literally as "my house." We who are inside the church tend to think of it as a nice place we run for our own comfort, convenience, and enjoyment. We act like the primary purpose of the church is to serve ourselves, rather than to share what we have with those outside. But of course, the church is not our house. It doesn't belong to us; it is not ours to do with as we please. It is God's house, not ours. And because God welcomed us into God's family when we were strangers to God, so we are to reach out to welcome strangers into the community of Christ's love.

Christian hospitality is not a church survival strategy. It is, of course, true, that many churches, including ours, will probably not exist twenty or thirty years from now unless we become more intentional about welcoming and inviting. The average age of those sitting in Presbyterian pews this morning is somewhere in the early sixties, and continuing to rise. Our churches will disappear if we don't figure out how to reverse that trend. But the purpose of Christian hospitality is not to ensure our own survival. Hospitality is not a code word for improving church financial condition by attracting more dues-paying members. Christian hospitality is rooted in our convictions that all people need to experience the love and grace of God, and that Vernon Church is a good place to experience God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. If we hold those convictions, and if we care about those who have yet to experience the blessings of Christian community, then it's clear what our next step is to be. The call to hospitality is a persistent theme throughout scripture. The Hebrew Bible proclaims that God's people are to welcome strangers, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:19). Jesus

said: “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). Paul said: “Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:7). Lydia said, “Come and stay at my house.”

Welcoming strangers is not just offering a friendly greeting when people we don't know happen to walk in our door. Because God has taken the first step to welcome us, we are called to take the initiative to bring outsiders closer into relationship with God and into Christian community. This means evaluating all our church ministries and programs in light of that objective. It means being willing to ask ourselves some hard questions about whether existing ministries and programs truly serve that objective and what changes we might make to better serve that objective. It means being open to making changes, not just continuing to do what no longer works, and hoping for a different result. It means understanding that sharing God's love by welcoming strangers is everyone's calling in Christ. No exceptions.

Research tells us that about 60% of the people in our general area have no church affiliation. Think about the people you work with, your neighbors, the parents of your children's friends, the people you see regularly in the course of social activities, the clerks, the waiters and waitresses who serve you, the people who clean our teeth and repair our automobiles. Who will tell them that God loves them, and has given them lives filled with meaning and purpose? Who will share with them the peace that passes all understanding in the midst of a chaotic world? Who will help them see hope in times of despair? Who will show them that abundant life is not about what we hoard for ourselves but about what we give away? And who will be there when they leave the emergency room?

Welcoming strangers does not mean threatening them with eternal torment if they don't accept Christ, nor does it mean telling them what's missing from their lives and where they can find it. I know from my own experience that folks outside the church, and I once was one, often know that something is missing from their lives, but they don't have a clue what it is. I came to the church and met Jesus Christ because a friend invited me, and when I arrived, the people there made me feel welcomed and valued. This is something we all can do. Pray for the right opportunity. Pray for the willingness to say: My faith, my church mean a lot to me. I'd love it if you'd join me some time. Sure, some people will say no. Don't let that discourage you. As Mother Teresa liked to say, our job is to be faithful, not successful. Taking the initiative is up to us; the results are not. It was God, not Paul, who opened Lydia's heart.

Then Lydia said: Come to my house. Come and stay.

All to God's glory, honor and praise, world without end. Amen.