

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Robert M. Alexander**  
**“A Faithful Response”**  
**Acts 16: 9-15**  
**6th Sunday of Easter**  
**May 1, 2016**

Following the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15, Paul and Silas left for Paul’s second missionary journey. First they stopped to check on the churches that had been established in his first journey. They had planned to continue their travels on into Asia but were prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit continued to guide their journey through a series of closed doors and open windows until they found themselves in the port city of Troas next to the Aegean Sea. It was there that Paul had a dream.

Read Acts 19:9-15

In the 1989 movie “Field of Dreams”, Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner, begins the movie by walking through his Iowa corn field minding his own business while checking on his crops when he hears a voice that only he can hear. “If you build it, he will come.” The voice says. Through a series of visions, Ray determines that he is supposed to plow under his corn crop and build a baseball field. He doesn’t know why he is being asked to do any of this but he believes with every fiber of his being that this is what he is supposed to do. Ray takes a huge leap of faith as he encounters all kinds of obstacles in trying to reach his vision. Everyone thinks he has lost his mind. He is on the verge of bankruptcy and losing his farm and this puts a huge strain on his marriage. He has done something completely illogical that only he has the eyes of faith to see and he still doesn’t know why. That is, until his daughter notices the “baseball man” that shows up in the baseball field. It is then that he is able to share his vision with his family and even then, he doesn’t know where the road will lead. But at least he has good company along the way. The point is, that all along the way, as the vision is being revealed to Ray Kinsella he offers a faithful response.

Were our journey with Jesus Christ a solitary Leap of Faith like Rays then we might just throw in the towel early on and decide that what was being asked of us was just too much. After all, we are called to lose our lives for the sake of the gospel, to die to self, to reorder our priorities, to turn our love of self toward love for God and neighbor and to use our blessings for the wellbeing of others. The path of discipleship seems extremely illogical at times until we begin to understand that the fullness of life is only experienced as we live out God’s will for us, for the church, and for all of creation.

Paul, following his Damascus Road experience, had caught a glimpse of what this life in Jesus Christ is really all about. In today’s story read from Acts, we find him, along with his companions, living that out in response to a plea for help that came in a vision.

The vision, according to the text, was of a man from the Roman province of Macedonia. And Paul and his companions were convinced that they were being called by God to go there to proclaim the good news. So they went. They sailed to the port town of Neopolis and then journeyed on to the Roman colony of Philippi. We don’t know who the Macedonian man was. He is never identified in the text. Instead, Paul, Silas, and their companions, meet a well-to-do business woman named Lydia. We know she was well off because she sold purple cloth – a rare color that was expensive and sold to royalty and to the military. She was from Thyatira – a city on the other side of the Aegean Sea in the Region of Lydia. Some scholars think that the woman’s name may not have actually been Lydia but rather that she was a Lydian – as in someone from the Region of Lydia. We will call her Lydia from Philippi. Paul met her in the place of prayer.

You see, it was common for Paul to seek out the Jewish community on the Sabbath. The fact that he went to this place of prayer outside of the city gates suggests that the Jewish community in Philippi was very small and

there was no organized synagogue. Instead, those who were of the Jewish faith and those who were interested in the things of God would gather there by the river in prayer and worship. It was at that place where Paul sat and shared the story of Jesus and where Lydia heard the good news of the gospel, believed it and was baptized. There is no great fanfare about this. The text tells us only that God opened Lydia's heart to receive the good news by faith and that she and her household were baptized. Immediately she responded by opening her home to Paul and his companions. Her home became their basecamp as they continued to minister in Philippi. It is thought that Lydia's home was the location of the first house church in Philippi. Later in chapter 16, when Paul and Silas are miraculously released from jail after having been wrongfully imprisoned, they returned to Lydia's house to greet the community of faith before moving on to another town.

Luke has given us a beautiful story and it leaves us with a variety of questions, not only questions about the characters and events in Acts 16 but also about our own lives. I want to explore three questions that came to me in my own study of the text.

First, where and to whom is God calling us? Discerning God's call is always an exciting and terrifying thing. And though we may think we are answering God's call correctly, that is no guarantee that we are. The story gives me comfort though. Clearly Paul and his companions had a desire to go where God wanted them to go. There were at least two occasions when they were prevented from going where they thought they should go. And when something might have seemed really illogical, like chartering a sail boat and going to some place even farther away, Paul's companions trusted him and off they went in response to this cry for help.

This story caused me to imagine our Nicaraguan Mission Team in Kilambe this coming June. What would happen if Rosemary Klein were to wake up one morning and tell me that she had a vision of a man from Honduras asking for help and she suggested that we ride horses over the mountains to get there...well - what would we do? Would I trust her enough to go? Would I trust God enough?

There seems to be an amazing level of trust between Paul and his companions. This isn't just about one person's vision. It impacts a whole community, and as you can see, it can impact the whole world. Our response to God's call invites us to participate in the Mission of God that the Holy Spirit is orchestrating. It is not our mission. It is God's mission and that mission impacts the entire church and the world. And the scriptures teach us that God will guide us in the right direction if we are listening...if we are paying attention...and if our hearts are in the right place.

People at DCPC have been hearing all kinds of calls lately. Is God calling us to be peacemakers by becoming more involved in Muslim-Christian relations? Is God calling us to reach out to Syrian refugees and help them find a new home? Is God calling us to bring an end to homelessness here in the northern part of Mecklenburg County? Is God calling us to love children who are living on the edge of poverty each and every day and who need help to stay in school and to learn so that they can make the most of every opportunity that this country, that this world has to offer them? Is God calling us to stand with the marginalized of our society and to speak truth to the systems of our world that continue to oppress? Is God calling us to go and to respond to these cries for help? What cries do you hear? Where and to whom is God calling us? That's one question.

I have a second question. Is my heart open to what the Lord is saying? I think about how my heart has been opened in the past - when I heard the good news of the gospel. It didn't just happen one time. It happened many times. Growing up in church and Sunday school; going to Camp Grier and Montreat Youth Conferences; sitting in a Bible study with High school friends before school started; conferences at Windy Gap with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship; talking with friends in seminary late into the evening; praying with my wife and now with my children. How has my heart been open in the past and is it now and will it continue to be in the future? The scriptures tell us that the Lord opened Lydia's heart and that she was listening eagerly. In some ways I think this may mean that it is all up to God to open hearts - and yet Lydia showed up and she stayed and she did not resist when the gospel was proclaimed. Maybe that is what it takes for us to be open to what the Lord is saying. We must show up...we must stay...and we must not resist when God invites us to listen.

My third question is this: What do we have to offer as a faithful response to God? Let's think for a moment about what Lydia offered. She offered her hospitality and her home. In the book Radical Hospitality, Father Daniel Homan and Lonni Collins Pratt reflect on the heart of Benedictine spirituality and offer some of the following nuggets of wisdom.

**"Hospitality** is a courageous way of living that challenges our compulsion either to turn away or to turn inward and disconnect ourselves from others"<sup>i</sup>

**"Hospitality** is not about social graces but about mutual reverence."<sup>ii</sup>

**"Hospitality** is a spiritual and ethical issue...it puts an end to injustice."<sup>iii</sup>

**"Hospitality** ultimately involves us *with* others, and we will become tangled up in relationships."<sup>iv</sup>

When Lydia welcomed Paul and his friends into her home she was inviting a stranger in. But the Lord had opened her heart and she found courage to open her home, to share her family, and her table, and her living space with them. She opened herself to the potential scorn of her neighbors, knowing that these new acquaintances needed a place to stay and that the work that they had been called to do there would not be well received by everyone. She put her resources at risk as she provided a space for a house church to develop and grow. Lydia indeed became involved and her life became tangled up in relationships. The offering of her gifts, no doubt, caused her some challenges, but my guess is that her offering left her far richer in other ways.

And that is always what we find when we offer ourselves to God and to God's work. Whether we are entrusting ourselves to God through our financial gifts or whether we are doing so through our time spent tutoring children, or teaching the Bible, or praying for others, or serving the homeless. Whether we are opening our home to a stranger or whether we are singing in a memorial service of someone we didn't even know that well. We find that the gifts we bring come back upon us in miraculous and astounding ways and we are blessed. I know I have been. And I am convinced that Paul was and that Lydia was.

So what do you have to offer to God as a faithful response? I have seen evidence of amazing and generous people here at DCPC offering themselves faithfully to God. Today we give thanks for one group of people in particular – our SAGES – Senior Adults Growing, Engaging, and Serving. You'll hear more about that in a bit...but I do want to say how very inspired I am by the many ways I see this group freely offering themselves faithfully to God in response to God's love and grace. Perhaps you have been inspired too!

I close this sermon with one of my new favorite hymns from our hymnal. It is Hymn 692, "Spirit, Open My Heart" by Ruth Duck, and you are welcome to turn to that hymn and read or sing along as we offer these words to God in prayer.

Spirit, open my heart to the joy and pain of living.  
As you love may I love, in receiving and in giving.  
Spirit, open my heart.

God replace my stony heart with a heart that's kind and tender.  
All my coldness and fear to your grace I now surrender.  
Spirit, open my heart.

Write your love upon my heart as my law, my goal, my story.  
In each thought, word, and deed, may my living bring you glory.  
Spirit, open my heart.

May I weep with those who weep; share the joy of sister, brother.  
In the welcome of Christ, may we welcome one another.  
Spirit, open my heart.

Spirit, open my heart to the joy and pain of living.  
As you love may I love, in receiving and in giving.

Spirit, open my heart.  
**May it be so! To God be the Glory! Amen.**

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<sup>i</sup> Radical Hospitality. Paraclete Press. 2002. P.9

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid. p. xviii

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p. 5

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid. p. 129