

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
“Crossing Boundaries”
Acts 16: 16-40
7th Sunday of Easter
May 8, 2016

In last Sunday’s sermon, Robert told us about Lydia and how Paul met her in the city of Thyatira as he and his companions were on their way to a place of prayer. That Paul would disregard such Pharisee maxims as “Talk not much with a woman...Everyone that talks much with a woman causes evil to himself...and his end is he inherits [Hell]” shows how different a person he had become since encountering Christ on the road to Damascus. (1)

Today, in the verses that immediately follow last Sunday’s Scripture lesson, Paul is again on his way to a place of prayer. He meets another woman, a slave-girl. Paul’s encounter with her sets into motion a dramatic chain of events.

.....

This past Thursday, our church administrator Harriett Rosebrough, Jane Campbell, and I attended a class at Union Presbyterian Seminary on communications in the church. It was taught by Ken Garfield, former religion writer for *The Charlotte Observer* and now the director of communications for Myers Park United Methodist Church.

Here is what he said that we should know:

1. Communication in and by the church is ministry. It is not an add-on.
2. Communication in and by the church is rocket science by which he meant that in the 21st century, communication is complicated, as complicated as rocket science!
3. Everybody in the church has the ministry of communication. Everybody has a story to tell, and a central role of the church is to help people figure out a way to tell our stories so that each of us realizes that we are not alone.

If Ken had put out the word that he was in the market for someone to co-teach the course with him, Luke, the writer of the two New Testament books of Luke and Acts, would have been the first to apply and no doubt, get the job.

Luke’s mantra, like Ken’s, would be: It is all about the story. It is all about your story meeting my story. More than that, it is the power of the Holy Spirit stitching together your story and my story and all our stories so that our stories become an amazing, multi-hued, beautiful, colorful quilt, a quilt that is nothing less than God’s story.

And God’s story, especially as it uniquely comes to us through Jesus Christ, is a story about crossing boundaries.

New Testament scholar Paul Walaskay has written that Acts 16 may be one of the most important chapters in Luke’s entire history of the early church for what Luke does in chapter 16 is to skillfully expand Paul’s groundbreaking statement in Galatians 3:28 (today’s Call to Worship) from 30 or so years earlier into an elegant story: There is no longer Jew (Paul and Silas) or Greek (Lydia, the slave-girl, the jailer), there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.” (2)

It is a bold story, whether it is a story told and lived out in the first century or in the twenty-first century. It is this bold story about crossing boundaries to which the members of our confirmation class are attaching their own particular stories today and thus claiming as their own.

One of the questions that the confirmands answered before the Session last Sunday afternoon and will answer again before the congregation is: Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his word, and showing his love, to your life’s end?

What does it look like for an eighth-grader living in this pluralistic world to be Christ’s faithful disciple? For that matter, what does it look like for any of us of whatever age we are living in this pluralistic world to be Christ’s faithful disciple?

There is no better place to find an answer to this question than in the stories of the New Testament, and, in particular, in the story that is recorded in Acts 16.

It’s all here, isn’t it?

Racism, sexism, injustice, in the criminal justice system, greed.

Acts 16 describes our present context in countless ways.

Indeed, Walaskay writes that when the jailer cries out, “What must I do to be saved?”, he isn’t talking about his eternal salvation at all. Rather, his world appears to be going to hell, literally, and he is making a commonsense plea: What do I have to do to survive this mess? (3)

What are disciples to do when we hear people pleading, What do I have to do to survive this mess?
Disciples follow the example of Paul and Silas, and ultimately of Lydia and the jailer too.

Here is what disciples don’t do according to Luke’s story in Acts. They don’t whine. They don’t have a pity party. They don’t build walls. They don’t look at life by fixating on what they see in the rearview mirror because when one does that, one takes one’s eyes off the road to the future that stretches out ahead. They don’t push people to the margins. They don’t shrink from crossing boundaries for fear of upsetting people.

Here is what disciples do: They pray. They sing and praise God even when they themselves are feeling shut out or silenced. They treat people...all people...even those with whom one disagrees with respect and, yes, even love. They extend hospitality and share their stories as they pass bowls of stew around the dinner table, discovering that they are by no means enemies as their parents may have taught them and their politicians may be ranting, but rather brothers and sisters in one human family. And they do all of this boundary-crossing, trusting that God is gathering up our efforts, our stories, if you will, toward that day when nothing less than a spiritual earthquake the likes of which the cosmos has yet to see unhinges the prison doors and throws them wide open and every single person everywhere shakes off the chains which keep us apart and we rush into the powerful and saving embrace of one another and the Creator who has brought us into being.

I got a glimpse of this world that God is bringing into being on Friday. Friday was the day for kindergartners at our partner school Blythe Elementary to have a special day with their mothers. It has been a long time since I was the mom of a kindergartener, and I’ve been told not to hold my breath about becoming a grandmother of a kindergartner, so I didn’t know if I would have the knack of standing in for a mom who couldn’t make it to school to be with her special kindergartner because she was at work. But I went because, well, I just felt like I should. Here is what I got to see and to feel: A cafeteria full of a rainbow quilt of children and moms and teachers and DCPC volunteers laughing and eating and blessing each other as they shared their stories. My partner Rosemary Raynal, a disciple of Jesus Christ, smiling and reassuring young Eli when he said, “My mother said that she would be here,” and Jennifer who spoke little if any English. Getting a hug from Alaina Thompson whom I had the privilege of baptizing before she could walk who has now grown up to be a confident kindergartner attending Blythe Elementary and remembering as I wrote this sermon how Alaina’s mom Meredith and her dad Harry had walked alongside DCPC middle school youth as they neared their confirmations and imagining Alaina coming to that day herself. Feeling almost like a mom when “my” kindergartner Nahareesh drew a picture of me with a heart and the word “love” written on it along with my name “Lib” and then reached up and threw her arms around my neck before she went back to class. (I pretty much felt like queen for a day...and I can’t help thinking if maybe what I felt was something like the thrill that rippled around the room in Lydia’s household and the household of the jailer when, Luke writes, they and their whole household were baptized.)

What does it look like to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in a challenging, pluralistic world that sometimes seems intent on schooling us in how to build walls and erect boundaries and be enemies of one another?

It looks like Paul and Silas singing in prison, and it looks like teenagers making music with Roxology.

It looks like Lydia gathering with other women to pray, and it looks like middle schoolers sharing where they saw God today in the late night back home group sharing at Massanetta.

It looks like Paul and Silas and the jailer and his family sharing a meal together, and it looks like the members of Davidson College Presbyterian Church and Davidson Presbyterian Church who bear within our separate congregations a history and legacy of racial division eating a sandwich supper together on Maundy Thursday and then passing around the bread and cup of communion and kneeling to wash one another’s feet.

It looks like Paul claiming his public voice to say, “No, I won’t be silent. We were thrown into prison unjustly, and we will not go away quietly,” and it looks like the Friday morning men’s group sitting down to hear the stories of and begin to build relationships with Muslim neighbors and some of those same Muslim neighbors showing up to be a part of our Habitat for Humanity Wildcat Build, and it feels like the energy that is beginning to bubble up around here about hosting immigrant families as they transition to a new life here in the States.

Brothers and sisters, It is all about the story, God’s story of crossing boundaries.

1. Paul W. Walaskay, *Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 157.
2. Walaskay, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, Volume 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 527.
3. Walaskay, *Acts*, 159.