

May 26, 2019

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Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

### **The Movement of the Gospel**

Paul thought he was going to a new land to help a Macedonian man. Instead he joined a riverside prayer circle and was hosted by a woman from Thyatira. This change in plans, and person, and place; the unexpected way the gospel moves is at the heart of today's reading from Acts, and of the book as a whole.

Acts, or if you go by its full name, the Acts of the Apostles, is often featured in the readings these weeks after Easter Sunday. This makes sense liturgically, narratively, theologically. In the Bible Acts follows the gospels, because Acts is about what happened after the life and death of Jesus, about how his disciples told others how life is different because of him: how we know we are loved by a love that is stronger than death; how we have a peace that is different from the peace the world gives; how we do not let our hearts be troubled, or afraid; how we have an Advocate, God's own Spirit, who is with us, teaching us, comforting us, strengthening us, helping us rejoice, helping us live as Easter people. Jesus told the disciples all of this before he died, as we heard in today's gospel. After he rose his disciples started telling others—after much initial confusion and fear, after a mega dose of the Holy Spirit. So it was they went from being disciples, learners, people who follow; to apostles, sharers, people sent out.

At first they shared the gospel with other Jewish people. That's who they knew, that's who they were—as, of course, was Jesus himself. But then some people who weren't Jewish started hearing about it, were drawn to it, were eager to be part of the movement. And so then there was a lot of discussion about how that would work. Did people need to observe Jewish customs to worship of the God of Israel revealed in a Jewish man? Much of the book of Acts—as well as concurrent correspondence is about how to make sense of this key question for the early church. Those who knew Jesus or stories of his life could recall that he himself regularly engaged with people from other places or of other religious practices. Often he pointed them out as models of faith. They could recall, too, that along with respecting tradition, he often reinterpreted it. As he did so, he was always asking, "What's this custom really about, and for? Respect that." And then there were these continued nudges from the Holy Spirit, signs that could not be ignored, visions about the gospel and its reach. These nudges—even shoves—from the Spirit would lead the apostles to new locations, to interact with different people. It would move people, in unexpected ways.

Paul himself epitomizes this. Unlike the first disciples, Paul never met Jesus in person—and Paul had big problems with people who did. Paul persecuted them. But then, thanks to a Spiritual intervention, Paul became one of them. This prompted a lot of discussion, much confusion and fear among Jesus' followers at first. God spoke to, God is speaking through, this guy? And then there was much discussion about where Paul would go, with whom he would share the good news. He had an excellent Jewish pedigree, was faultless in his religious training and practice. Nevertheless, the title by which Paul is remembered is: "the Apostle to the Gentiles." In many ways, all of us who are not Jewish have him to thank, and the Holy Spirit, who continued to move Paul, and the gospel, often in unexpected ways.

Like in today's passage from Acts, in which Paul intended to help a man in a Gentile land and instead was helped by a woman from another location. But even before today's story begins there's a change in plans. In the verses just before today's excerpt Paul had been intending to go east, to Asia, but the Holy Spirit had other ideas. Then, as today's reading begins, Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia, who pleads, "Come over and help us." So Paul goes west. (I

had to get out a map to make sense of all of this. In case that's helpful for you we put one on the cover of the bulletin.) Paul crosses the Aegean Sea and arrives in the city of Philippi, a capital of Macedonia. The man who beckoned him doesn't materialize but Paul does meet a group of women, outside the city, praying by the river. One of them, Lydia, is originally from Thyatira (which, somewhat ironically, is in Asia minor). She's an immigrant, and a businesswoman, and open to the gospel, incredibly open-hearted. After her whole household is baptized, she opens her home to Paul, shows him hospitality, helps him. Different people enter the story, become part of the movement. Destinations are adjusted. Plans change.

You may know that years ago my husband Tim and I worked as teachers in rural Tanzania. We were newly married, we wanted to do something of service and adventuresome, it just happened to be with the Lutheran church. After some time in that very different location, a time that was more meaningful than we ever could have imagined—the hospitality we received from people we were there to “help”—after four years it was time to return to the U.S. I was finding it harder and harder to ignore the Spirit's nudge, or shove, and so we decided to move to Chicago, so I could attend the Lutheran seminary down in Hyde Park. That was the destination. We found a place to live, Tim found a job, our two young children experienced their first Chicago winter. And then I ended up going to a different divinity school. It was still in the neighborhood, but was not a place I'd even considered. Honestly, I hadn't even heard of it until we moved two blocks away and someone told me to go check it out, and it welcomed me, with great hospitality.

But well before that change in plans, before I'd even met Tim, back when I was a college undergrad in northern Minnesota I was looking for a summer internship. I had my sights set on one in Washington DC, it was with NPR and I thought that sounded sophisticated. I didn't get it. But there was this other internship, in New York City—which seemed a scary place to relocate—and it was connected with the Lutheran Church—which was not appealing, working for the church. But it was available, so I made my way out there and then learned more about this organization that welcomed me: a relief and development agency that does incredible, inspiring work around the globe with all different kinds of people. While working for that agency, I fell in love with New York City, and then with Tim, that's where he grew up, though he wasn't there when I first was, at that time Tim was across the ocean, in a different country, serving with the Peace Corps. One week after he moved back to NYC I met him, at a Lutheran church. At first all he could talk about was this other country he'd been living in.

But well before that, before Tim and I even met, there were different people that we could have been with, thought we might be with. I don't need to need to go into that and enough of my story—you have your own. I am betting that you, too, can tell stories of when plans changed: times in your life when you thought you were going one place, and went another; times you thought you would be meeting one person, and met another; times you found yourself somewhere you hadn't expected, and how it expanded your life, what you do, who you are.

This is the story of Acts, of the early church, of the gospel, and how it moves. Some say this is our story right now, as a church. Some say that right now we are living in a time like Acts, a time when many do not know about God's great love for us. And so it's time for us, who do know, to share it. We have been given the Spirit. It's time for us to act. It's time for us to be apostles, to share the gospel, and to remember how it moves, taking us to places we hadn't plotted out, introducing us to people we hadn't expected—people who welcome us, people who open us up to what the Spirit is doing, in the world and in us.