

Shiloh United Methodist Church

God Bids Us Welcome Others In

Acts 16:9-15 Rev. Tyler Amundson May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁹ A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” ¹⁰ Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

¹¹ We sailed from Troas straight for Samothrace and came to Neapolis the following day.¹² From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia’s first district and a Roman colony. We stayed in that city several days. ¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. ¹⁴ One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul’s message. ¹⁵ Once she and her household were baptized, she urged, “Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house.” And she persuaded us.

Our scripture story today is one of my favorite stories in the Bible, it is simple and complex in how we understand our call as Christians to neighbor and share God’s love with others.

Let me start by giving us some of the historical story tied to this scripture passage. First, we need to look at a map of Paul’s journey. This describes Paul’s second missionary journey, and I want to point out that these enterprising adventures Paul went on were small operations. He and a few others would journey together enter communities, generally go to the local Synagogue

and share the message of Christ and see if anyone felt called by the Holy Spirit to practice the way of Christ. It was that annoyingly simple for those of us who spend our lives trying to figure out how to be church.

Paul in our story today is on this journey and he finds himself in Troas on the coast of the Aegean sea. He is planning at this time to head north to an area closer to the Black Sea, but instead he receives the strange vision we hear about in our scripture today. A story of a man calling out for Paul to go to Macedonia. This is a complete diversion from what Paul expected to do. It means a journey by sea, and the piece our scripture leaves out is all the pieces the journey took to get to Philippi in Macedonia from where he had the vision. It was a complete upending of Paul's original plan.

Over the last few weeks we have been studying at my church the book of Acts alongside the stories of Mr. Rogers, Fred Rogers, who played a key role in many American's lives through his television show, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. We have picked up a few pieces of neighboring from the scriptures in Acts. First, from Peter we learned about raising people to new life, that it involves spiritual practices of praying, saying the names of those struggling, and offering our hand to neighbors to help them out. Second, we learned from Peter that visions from God sometimes upend who we think God call us to neighbor, when Peter experiences a vision letting him know he should share Jesus' gospel, good news, with people outside the Jewish community.

This week it seems we are caught up in something of a vision upending Paul's plans again. In an age where we strategic plan our churches, Paul's simple missionary work and just following God's visions should be frustrating to us. We spend hours in church meetings and trying to learn how to follow God, and all

Peter and Paul do is follow spiritual practice and preaching to plant communities of Christian people who will change the world.

I heard a story once of a professor of a seminary interviewing a congregation and he found a majority of the pastors and people in the church reported having visions from God about where they were called to serve. When reflecting on this he wondered if we don't hear about what God calls others to is because to share something of the visions we have, might mean we have to change ourselves, our trajectory to make a difference in God's story of love and peace for all people.

Yet, here is Paul and we can tell from the letter to the Philippians that if he had not changed course and met Lydia, he would have missed out on planting one of the communities he was most thankful God called him to start. Read Philippians sometimes, see how deeply thankful Paul is for the way that community follows the love of Christ.

Additionally, let's remember that Paul's vision and his ultimate sharing of the gospel with the people in Philippi, resulted from the same spiritual practices Peter used to resurrect someone. Praying, learning their name, and offering them a hand to help them into the next steps of their life. We know very little of Lydia, the person Paul asked to start the community, except that culturally it would have been odd for Paul to have addressed her first, especially a woman who was head of household. So, we can only guess that God's vision caused him to think broader than even his own simple work he had done so far.

I want to stop for a minute and share a story with us before we go on:

There was once a king who had no son and longed for an heir who would succeed him to the throne. So he posted a

notice, inviting young men to apply to be considered for adoption into his family, to become his heir. All that he asked of the applicants was that they should love God and love their neighbour.

A poor peasant boy saw the notice, but he thought that he would have no chance of being adopted by the king because of the ragged clothes he wore. So he worked very hard, until he had just enough money to buy a new set of clothes. Wearing his new clothes, he then set off to the royal palace to apply for the position of the king's adopted son.

Now, as he was journeying towards the palace, the boy met a poor beggar on the road. The old man was shivering with cold, and the boy felt sorry for him and exchanged clothes with him.

As he was now back to wearing beggar's clothes, it hardly seemed worth going on towards the king's palace. However, having come so far already, the boy decided to keep going and at least see the king's palace from the outside.

When he arrived, he was greeted by scornful laughter and sneering remarks from the king's courtiers. Nevertheless, he was finally admitted into the presence of the king.

There was something strangely familiar about the king. At first, the boy couldn't work out what it was, and why he felt so at home in his presence. Then he realized that the king himself was wearing the clothes that he had given to the old beggar just a few hours ago along the road.

The king came down from his throne and embraced the boy, holding him close in his arms. 'Welcome, my son,' he said.¹

¹ Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (p. 170). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

Paul's journey, and Christ's message in the books of Acts is clearly that God is ready to adopt all people to him. To bless all of creation, and remind them they are children of a God who cares for them.

On this memorial day weekend, I think it is important that we take a minute to name the struggle in our country of letting all people know they are cared for. Memorial day honors those veterans who have died in our country. Men and women who went into some of the most awful and violent parts of our history and died in hopes of a better world.

This is the 75th anniversary of D-Day, so I would like us to watch a short reflection video and be in prayer for our veterans, those who have gone into awful conflict. Let us remember the pain, and fear they felt, and the great adversity they sought to overcome in our world.

<https://vimeo.com/337797984>

One of my favorite Memorial Day stories is the story of the 4 chaplains. This is isn't a D-Day story. There are 4 chaplains known as the "immortal chaplains" or the "Dorchester chaplains."

The relatively new chaplains all held the rank of first lieutenant. They included a Methodist minister, Rev. George L. Fox; a Rabbi Alexander D. Goode, of the Reform movement; a Roman Catholic priest, Rev. John P. Washington; and Reformed Church in America minister, Rev. Clark V. Poling. Their backgrounds, personalities, and faiths were different, although Goode, Poling and Washington had all served as leaders in the Boy Scouts of America. They met at the Army Chaplains School at Harvard University, where they prepared for assignments in the European theater, sailing on board USAT Dorchester to report to their new assignments.

The Story

USAT Dorchester left New York on Jan. 23, 1943, en route to Greenland, carrying the four chaplains and approximately 900 others, as part of a convoy of three ships.

The ship's captain, Hans J. Danielsen, had been alerted that Coast Guard sonar had detected a submarine. Because German U-boats were monitoring sea lanes and had attacked and sunk ships earlier during the war, Captain Danielsen had the ship's crew on a state of high alert even before he received that information, ordering the men to sleep in their clothing and keep their life jackets on. Many soldiers sleeping deep in the ship's hold disregarded the order because of the engine's heat. Others ignored it because the life jackets were uncomfortable.

During the early morning hours of Feb. 3, 1943, at 12:55 a.m., the German submarine U-223 off Newfoundland in the North Atlantic torpedoed the vessel, which knocked out the Dorchester's electrical system, leaving the ship dark. Panic set in among the men on board, many of them trapped below decks. The chaplains sought to calm the men and organize an orderly evacuation of the ship, and helped guide wounded men to safety.

One witness, Pvt. William B. Bednar, found himself floating in oil-smeared water surrounded by dead bodies and debris. "I could hear men crying, pleading, praying," Bednar recalls. "I could also hear the chaplains preaching courage. Their voices were the only thing that kept me going."

Another sailor, Petty Officer John J. Mahoney, tried to reenter his cabin but Rabbi Goode stopped him. Mahoney, concerned about the cold Arctic air, explained he had forgotten his gloves.

"Never mind," Goode responded. "I have two pairs." The rabbi then gave the petty officer his own gloves. In retrospect, Mahoney realized that Rabbi Goode was not conveniently carrying two pairs of gloves, and that the rabbi had decided not to leave the Dorchester.

As life jackets were passed out, the supply ran out before each man had one. The chaplains removed their own life jackets and gave them to others. They helped as many men as they could into lifeboats, and then linked arms and, saying prayers and singing hymns, went down with the ship.

According to some reports, survivors could hear different languages mixed in the prayers of the chaplains, including Jewish prayers in Hebrew and Catholic prayers in Latin.²

I need to share my own struggle in recent years with honoring veterans in our country. The wars in my own lifetime have been wars that seem to lack support and purpose in the world setting. Wars set against the backdrop of maintaining the American economic empire in the world, seem to be the only reason wars have been fought in my lifetime. Honoring those who go to fight in those wars feels difficult as Christian who believes deeply that armed conflict is something God does not desire for any of God's children. The difference between recent wars and World War 2 is that the conflict between good and bad seem, so much less clear. It has been hard to support war, and in turn our people returning from those wars have felt the lack of support.

Yet, there is a challenge there. In this struggle of wars, I have seen friends, veterans come back and not receive the support they need medically and psychologically. The other thing I have begun to be

² <https://jcca.org/what-we-do/jwb/story-of-the-four-chaplains/>

haunted by is the loneliness facing our troops who return. Percentage of the population this is the time in history when the lowest number of people in the United States can identify being in an armed conflict. This means veterans returning don't have as many people to relate to there situation, to advocate for them.³

One of my favorite authors cited that more people have taken their own lives returning from the recent conflicts, than have died in the conflicts.

Then to have someone in my office just over a week ago say, maybe we need to get veterans into our community. Friends, I think God is hoping we might reach some of these people, some of these modern day veterans who might be struggling. I don't know how yet, but I know it is needed. I suspect the next step is I probably will meet somebody or one of you will who could use the support of you or something like our congregation in their lives.

God works like this for so many people who are on the fringes of society that need support and place to be loved.

The simple message of Christ was to love each other as neighbors and I think this clip from Fred Rogers describes why we need to work to be neighbors. In this clip, he is defending the need for programs and teachings like his show to be on the air, to a Senator who has been little impressed to public television up to this point. I think if we work to love our neighbors, like the senator at the end of the clip we will see God's vision for our life much earlier, than if we just wait on God. Our faith is one of prayer and then taking courageous steps out in faith.

Mr. Roger's clip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fKy7ljRr0AA>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/10/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>

Friends, if we follow the scriptures then we learn that spiritual practice will lead us to helping others up, to visions of who to serve, and that it is simple to give of what we have, so all who give will be royalty in God's kingdom and in our communities. The world will be transformed when we learn to follow the spiritual practices of Christ in each day of our lives.