

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

Grace to you and peace, from God who was, who is, and who is to come.

Go back to Chapter 15 in the book of Acts where Paul had met with the twelve in Jerusalem. They didn't have a knockdown, drag out fight, but they did decide that it was all right for Paul and his entourage to go and do this very radical thing, and that was, to bring the message of Christ's love to the Gentiles.

This amazing venture takes off in large part due to Peter's vision. For those of you who were in worship last week you heard the first reading: Peter was up on a roof top had a vision of this sheet coming down from heaven filled with all kinds of critters and food that a good, observant Jew is NOT supposed to eat, and he was *commanded*, three times, that this food was now acceptable, because Christ has made all things *clean* – including Gentiles. We know that God has made the Gentiles clean because immediately after Peter has this vision, then he hears a knock on the door, and it turns out there were Roman soldiers there. Normally, when Roman soldiers show up at your door, that's not something that you want. But these guys were sent by a guy named Cornelius, he was a Centurion, in Caesarea. They said that Cornelius wants to invite Peter to his house. And, again, that's usually the type of an "invitation" you don't really want. But, Peter went along. There, at Cornelius' house, in Caesarea, he's talking about God, and he's talking about Jesus, Cornelius and those with him – his household, his soldiers – came to know and understand and realize exactly Who Jesus is; that he is indeed the Christ. As a matter of fact, as they're altogether there talking, Cornelius and everyone there are blessed by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit comes and descends upon them, and Peter says, 'well, if God has chosen these *Gentiles*, then who am I to say we shouldn't?' So Peter baptized all those who are gathered there.

Now, there were some, tho, who were saying 'Why did you baptize these *aliens* these *Gentiles*? Don't they know that God's love, grace, and forgiveness, is only supposed to be for the Jewish believers?' Well, no they don't, because apparently that's not who God's grace, love and forgiveness is for – it's for ALL of us. In Jerusalem - in Chapter 15, which we didn't read, because the readings went from chapter 11 to chapter 16, but you can go home and read them, they're really good chapters, 11, 12,13, 14, 15, go home and read them, there's good stuff, they're really good chapters, - in Jerusalem, in chapter 15, they have this discussion: So, if we're going to preach to these Gentiles, what exactly do they need to do in order to truly show that they are believers. Because, from a Jewish point of view, there's that who issue concerning the removal of a little bit of skin. I mean, really, especially for males, what's that little bit of skin?. You might lose more skin sliding under a donkey running away from the Roman soldiers. But the council agrees, with the guidance of Peter - who had the vision - and James, they agree that it's ok for Paul to bring this message to the Gentiles, but they do give him this caveat:

(28) For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: (29) that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

*Acts 15:28-29 NRSV*

So they're given instruction. They're told it's ok to go out and bring the message, so Paul and Barnabus set off to go out to Asia. Along the way they pick up a young guy named Timothy. While they are out and about, trying to get their way to Asia (remember they were in Jerusalem, so now they're going northeast toward Asia), Paul has a vision. He sees a man from Macedonia, pleading with him to come and help them. Up until this point, Paul has been rather steadfastly trying to avoid going to Macedonia and Greece, but he figures if God has gone out of the way to give him this vision, then maybe he really ought not to ignore it. So off they head across the waters to this country of Philip and Alexander. Specifically, they head toward a town known as Philippi.

Philippi is named after Philip of Macedonia, Father of Alexander known as The Great, to put things in an historical perspective. Philip founded that country when he united Macedonia around 350 BCE. It fell out of use, and so for a while it was really no more than a wide spot in the road. Around 50 BCE Emperor August began to allow his military folk to retire to there. Specifically he allowed his officers to retire there. So there on this warm, coastal little inlet, there are at least two cultures living side by side and working together. There are the Greeks, who founded the city, and the Romans, who had been there for at least 100 years by this point in the story. Add to that, the constant influx from an active port, and you've got a very vibrant and exciting community going on there at Philippi.

Paul, and his gang, are there on a Sabbath, what we would know as Saturday, and they are heading out looking for a place to pray. We're finally now into the passage we heard this morning. Did you notice there are a couple of things you may not have picked up on? First, did you notice that there's a rather interesting change in pronouns? The passage starts off talking about "they" and "them," but right at the end of verse 10, they suddenly start talking about "us" and "we." Who are "we"? Well, we infer from that print that it is Luke himself who has now joined the party, he has joined with Paul. Luke is writing firsthand what he is observing and what he is taking a part of. Second, as they are going to look for a place to pray, that implies there is no synagogue in Philippi, which in turn implies that the Jewish community is pretty much non-existent or maybe really incredibly sparse, that there are not enough numbers of Jewish believers there to be able to have their own house of worship, so they gather down by the river.

They gather down by the river to pray. That's where Paul & Luke & the others find a nice quiet spot there at the river, thinking that they're going to be alone, but lo and behold, there's already a group gathered there. We assume that the folks gathered there are of the Jewish persuasion. Or, as Acts and other places call them, "God-fearers." One of these folks happens to be not only female, but is a Gentile named Lydia. She is indeed a rather remarkable woman. She herself is a God-

fearer, she herself is a Gentile, she herself is a business person. More important than that, she is a business woman in a male-dominated world. She is a business woman to the wealthy—that is what “a dealer in purple cloth” means. It’s only the wealthy who buy purple. It’s the upper echelon who wear purple. She caters specifically to those who have the financial means. Here is this woman, this Lydia, this Gentile, for whom “God opens her heart.” She not only comes to believe in Jesus as Christ, but she implores Paul and his group, to come and stay with her, she uses this great line: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord.” (Didn’t know there is some good Lutheran Guilt right there in the scripture, did you?) So Paul and those folks go and stay with her, apparently for some time. They stay with her for so long that they get a vibrant Christian community going right there in Philippi. A Christian community that not only continues to support Paul throughout his ministry, they support Paul even when he is arrested, and these are the folk to whom he returns when he is released from jail. That is how strong and vibrant these believers in Philippi become – because of the time they spent with them, and because of God working through Paul, God working through Barnabus, God working through Luke, working through Lydia, there in Philippi.

Isn’t that the way God often does it, though? God tends to use things that, or people that I might be surprised? ‘Really God, you’re going to use *this* person?’ We find God in one place, but suddenly we realize that even though God is there, we not necessarily recognizing the form God is using. For God is using those folk whom I don’t expect: the homeless guy on the street; the girl with all those tattoos up and down her arms, and piercings in places I don’t even want to think about. God uses folks that I might not expect. God uses men, and God also uses women and kids. God even uses teenagers, senior citizens, middle aged.

God uses people who are different from me. God uses business people, and musicians, and mathematicians and chemists. God uses people from Ireland and Asia, as well as folk from Tanzania or Liberia. Those who have dark skin, light skin, or tan skin. God uses brunettes or blonds, or those of us who are losing most of the stuff on top. More importantly than God using these folks, is the fact that God loves them, just as much as God loves me. Sometimes that is a bit difficult to accept. I have to say that I really don’t want all of those Tea Party folks in my world. I really don’t understand them, they tend to dress funny, and I am not certain I agree with anything they’re proclaiming. I think, also, that my world is a whole lot better off without Polka music. All that “omm-pah” gives me a headache. Most sea food I just don’t care for. Give me food from the land or the air, thank you very much.

Yet I have learned, that God uses, I know that God loves, and I believe that God calls, people who are part of the Tea Party, and folks who enjoy Polka music, and even those who love calamari. Just as God used this Gentile Business Woman Lydia, God can, and *does*, use me, and you.

And we can Thank God for that.

Amen.

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