

“When Doors Close...And Doors Open”

Sermon on Acts 16:6-15

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Acts 16:6-15

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; 8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

INTRO: Maybe my very favorite letter that the Apostle Paul ever wrote is the short one we know as Philippians - letter to the church located in the city called Philippi. It is probably Paul’s most heartfelt, joyful letter. It is obvious how deep his love and connection is with this particular congregation.

Paul writes this particular letter from prison and after a couple verses of customary greeting, he starts in with...

“I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...”

The Greek word there for “partnership” is *koinonia*.

It is a word that on one hand refers to a friendship – an abiding affinity for another, care for another, joy in another’s company. But it is more than just the kind of friends who are really great to take a vacation with or to spend the evening over dinner and drinks...it refers on the other hand to a relationship with a shared responsibility.

- You know yourselves knit together in a shared endeavor of importance.
- You are working with another person or persons in a friendship that is moving the ball forward on something that matters.

In Paul's case, it is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Advancing God's hope and healing through pain and beyond the grave, advancing God's love against all fear, advancing God's way against all darkness. *"Philippians, when I think of you, I give thanks. I pray for you with joy for we share koinonia - kinship and purpose. Friendship and a deep sense of calling."* To whom would you write that kind of letter?

Perhaps we have had that sense of deep friendship and shared responsibility in previous years or jobs or congregations...perhaps we have it now. Maybe, for some of us, it would be such a gift to know a new season of koinonia...or know for the first time. I am mindful how devastating this pandemic has been to people's mental health. Depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety - these are markedly up since March, and in part because of the intense isolation and lack of communal support that some have known. The gift of koinonia is deeply relevant Good News to many right now.

How did Paul find this gift so remarkably with these Philippians? And more, we might add, how did he, a Jewish man from Tarsus, find this gift with Gentiles - a wholly other ethnic group located a thousand miles away in on the continent of Europe? This too feels deeply relevant as we discern how it is the church in America - so often siloed by race and ethnicity - might discover koinonia with sisters and brothers in the church of Jesus Christ who may be 1000 miles away or all of a mile away but with whom we've never crossed paths.

How does God knit the gift koinonia we so desperately need - and across the kind of lines we so often think unimaginable? We turn to Acts 16 for clues, I think, to how this gift of koinonia all came together for Paul and the church at Philippi - and consider what it might mean for our koinonia.

ONE: "Forbidden" and "Not Allowed" West and North

The story starts with Paul not even thinking about Philippi or anyone in that distant direction. We have Paul and a younger man, Timothy, traveling together trying to go **west into Asia** (what we know as Asia Minor today and is mostly comprised of Turkey). For whatever reason, traveling west, moving west, heading west seemed a promising place to share the Good News about Jesus. But we're told that they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit" to speak at all over in that direction.

So then they try and head **north to Bithynia**. But, we read "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Forbidden that way. Disallowed this way. And we wonder - what does that look? How do you know when the Holy Spirit has "forbidden" a direction? When Jesus has "disallowed" someone to go where they wanted to go? Where we thought it good to go?

TWO: Adoption Falls Through

September 2015, Michelle and I get the call. The adoption agency has someone for us. "It's a girl – she's due to be born in a week.

- At least one of her parents did drugs.
- The mother wants the baby adopted.
- The father has a criminal record and even though it's unlikely any court in this land would grant him custody, he will try.

So, you would be fostering this girl in hopes of adopting if custody were not granted to him."

We'd been in the adoption process for 8 or 9 months at that point, and I can still remember that call and this overwhelming sense that though, yes, the drugs, yes, custody situation, yes, the utter immediacy... "Yes, we'll do it. A baby girl." As word got out, our family, folks in the church – so many were excited. Friends brought over some second-hand clothes. We were looking into baby gear. And three days later we get another call that the whole thing has fallen through. The mother placing the child for adoption had been using two different agencies to make sure the father had less of a chance to figure out where she was and the baby would go. Another couple had long been waiting to adopt this girl, actually. We were pawns in process to keep the father from figuring anything out. It felt like bricks piled on our heart.

Is that what "forbidden by the Holy Spirit" can look like? When the door we ached to walk through, we planned to walk through, we anticipated walking through...just closes? Are closed doors the hand of God drawing us elsewhere?

I am leery of anyone who interprets every opening and every closing as "God did it." At the same time, I am leery of anyone who throws their hands up and says, "Who knows if this closed door is God or not?" We are called to grow in our ability to attend to the Spirit's leading through Scripture, through the counsel of one another, through a prayerful sense given within. And one way or another I know all of us know what it is to have a direction we thought sensible, thought right, thought good - close shut.

One of the questions this particular passage raises about such things is this: are some of these closed doors part of the long thread of the Holy Spirit knitting surprising koininia? (Remember, the Philippians are not at all on the radar yet for Paul - and yet this is part of the story).

THREE: NIGHT IN TROAS

Somehow Paul and Timothy know God would not have them go west or north and so they end up in Troas. And Luke says, *"During the night Paul had a vision..."* Luke could have said, *"During his stay in Troas, Paul had a vision..."* But it's the nighttime that is underscored. As if to suggest that often it really is while we are completely in the dark about which way to go and what will happen next that...as if to suggest it really is when the angst and protest and grief and anger and uncertainty are at their most opaque.... There, in that valley, the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard. Darkness has a way of heightening our senses...does it not?

It is in the dark that Paul notices the movement of the Good Shepherd drawing him toward the open door. The Spirit's movement comes in the form of a vision - it is a vision of a man from a region called Macedonia, which is part of Europe. He is pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Immediately, Paul and Timothy went to Macedonia convinced, we read, that that vision was God calling them to proclaim Good News there.

This moment reminds me of what Frederick Buechner famously said about calling: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." "Your deep gladness...." The thing that brings you joy, the things for which you have gifts from God...intersects world's hunger, ache, need.

"Over here, Paul. Your deep joy in preaching Jesus, your gifts for sharing his love...they are needed not just in some general sense...but in this hunger here in Macedonia!" How often the long night that follows closed doors heightens our senses for the movement of the Spirit unto such an intersection.

FOUR: SAILING

I think it is not an accident that Luke then explains that Paul and Timothy "set sail" toward the region of Macedonia. Yes, geographically, they needed to cross a portion of the Aegean Sea. But the sailboat was a significant symbol for the early church and what the life of faith looks like. They understood that one of the signs that you have started to move into the way of God's leading is that, eventually, things start moving along in ways deeper and more powerful than you could have ever made them move on your own. It's less "row row row" your boat and you get out what you put in kinda thing, but wind picks up and you think, "This is not just me, this is not just us...there is a power, a movement, a wind at our back." Paul and Timothy – once forbidden here, disallowed there, in the dark here...now sailing...

FIVE: LEO

After things changed with that baby girl we had another possibility arise for adoption...that fell through. And so we sat in January of 2016 ready to really start rowing. We were going to do every last thing people advise you to do when adopting – letters to everybody you know, social media use, posting blogs on adoption websites – absolutely anything and everything to get your name “out there” in any circle or realm – and then keep it there so folks know you are ready and willing to adopt. And just as we are taking a weekend to really put our rowing oars in the water...a phone call arrives from CA. Which began a Skype meeting the next day with a young couple who were international students in LA asking if we might come and be parents for their child to be born in the next month. He was born just a week later, and we know him as Leo.

There are a number of other fascinating and fun details to this story as some of you know, but looking back one of the more striking features was the fact that so much of what unfolded had a “wind at our back” quality. And really it was the same with Logan’s story for those of you familiar with that. It was this mix of prayers from all over, their need, the way the circumstances fell together...

SIX: PHILIPPI FOR THE FIRST TIME

Paul and Timothy set sail, and they arrive at a leading city of the Macedonian region called Philippi, the Gentile people with whom Paul would share an unparalleled kinship and sense of purpose. But that is getting ahead of ourselves... when he arrives for the first time we read that he and Timothy just remained in the city for some days. Nothing happens in the very space where eventually the richest of friendships shall emerge. Then, one Sabbath day Paul and Timothy head down to the river to a place of prayer. There, they meet a group of women gathered there. Among them is a woman named Lydia who is a dealer of purple cloth, which only the wealthiest of patrons can afford. And she has a whole household of folks under her.

Lydia is a person of means, of influence, of connections. And it turns out the Lord has opened her heart to listen eagerly to all Paul and Timothy had to say, and so even though Paul and Timothy are now on land, the sailing really has not stopped. Meeting this woman grants Paul and Timothy a hearing with her whole household and their associations - it really has a “wind at its back” feel.

Eventually, it comes to a point that Lydia and her whole household are baptized – their will and ways submerged and they rise to a new following of Jesus. And then the first thing she does with her house? She opens the whole thing up: “come, Paul and Timothy, and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon them to do just that.

And so a story that began with closed doors to the west and the north...now, in the very far west, among Gentiles of an entirely different culture and way of being... the doors are so wide they are pulling Paul and Timothy to come along, to speak, to stay, offer your gifts. Talking about sailing.

EIGHT: TIMOTHY

And yet...it is also important to notice that even as Paul is heading the entire time toward the gift of beautiful koinonia unfolding somewhere he never saw coming...the whole time he also has the gift of koinonia growing right there in his midst.

Another one of Paul's letters that opens with a unique exuberance is his second letter to Timothy, his long-time travel companion on these journeys. *"To Timothy my true son in the faith...I thank Go... as night and day I constantly remember you in my prayers. Recalling your tears, I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy...."*

Timothy:

1. the one with Paul when the Holy Spirit forbade their hopes for going east.
2. the one with Paul when Jesus blocked them from going north.
3. the one there in Troas when the vision came in the night.
4. the one there when they arrive at Philippi and then do nothing – for days unsure what will happen.

CONCLUSION

Jesus is always taking us somewhere -or as our passage points out, to someone(s). And we are wise to discern amid closed doors and dark nights and windy movements and even unlikely strangers prevailing upon us...if these are not the Holy Spirit knitting new and unlikely and rich koinonia, drawing us unto life across the kind of walls that often divide. And also, let's never lose sight of who is on our left and right journeying with us this very day. Because the truth is, First Presbyterian Church Georgetown, TX, we are a bunch of Timothys to one another.

Those who've been members forever and they go back generations in the church...and those who've joined this church during the pandemic and those may or may not be 'members' but have been definitely in and with the FPC family.... We are travel companions who share in koinonia. This is the gift of Jesus Christ who has called us friends.

And so I want to end this sermon by sharing about something very practical and exciting that we are going to do this fall that we might grow more deeply and fully into the koinonia that we have with one another.

We continue to recognize that it is difficult to gather safely in large group gatherings, especially indoors, at least right this moment. But that does not preclude possibilities for smaller group gatherings located outdoors in which we might grow in koinonia. So...during the second week of September, the week of September 13, we are looking to launch "Porch Pals." These are groups of 6 to 10 people who will meet together for an hour and 15 minutes each week for seven consecutive weeks for fellowship, reflection, and prayer. Why "Porches?"

The word "porch" underscores the fact that these groups will meet outside. Various members of FPC have volunteered their porch or a spot in their backyard as a good, shady gathering spot for a small group to meet.

"Pals" makes for memorable alliteration :) Plus, it underscores the fact that Jesus has called us 'friends' - both of him and one another as family in Christ. "Pals" also reminds us that we are gathering to grow in the gift of koinonia through which God so often births the kind sailing we could never have thought to ask for or imagine (see Paul and Timothy, Acts chapter 16).

And the idea is that each week that these Porch Pal gatherings come together, enjoy fellowship, and they'll have been given a couple questions to help them reflect on the most recent Sunday scriptures, sermon, and service of worship.

Obviously we will have various protocols in place to ensure safety as we seek to guard against the spread of COVID-19. Those protocols plus details about these groups and the sign-up process if you are interested - all of that will be coming to your email inboxes shortly - we hope by the end of this coming week. So, be on the lookout for more details about Porch Pals.

Because already these last six months has been filled with some of the strangest closed doors, some of the darkest nights, and truly a most circuitous route...but what if in and through all of it the thread of the Holy Spirit is knitting a profoundly beautiful koinonia - with people we did not have on the radar as well as with the ones who've been with us the whole way? And what if Porch Pals isn't the next space for some of us to lean into what the Spirit is up to in bringing forth truly Good News?