

Sunday 17th May 2020

Being the New church

Acts 16: 11-15

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You know, being the old church is a huge responsibility sometimes. Just keeping things running smoothly takes a lot of work. Budgets have to be planned and raised, and in financially hard times it's not easy. And even more daunting sometimes, are the spiritual responsibilities. We're called to be examples of the love of God for the world. But sometimes it is hard to love everyone in the church, let alone the world! And some people don't make it any easier, you know!

Sometimes it seems that all of our energies are spent on just keeping our heads above water. Especially at this moment as we deal with the Corona Virus. Sometimes it seems as if the church — is just surviving in this world. But we've been called to do so much more. **We know that God has given us good news about love, and we're called to spread that message of love.**

And sometimes the task of being the Church of Christ seems too big. What can we do? We're so small and our responsibilities are so huge. What makes a church a CHURCH? What is the true test of a church? In other words, what do we need to be doing to be the kind of church God desires for us to be?



I think this passage from the book of Acts – about a new church – gives us a few clues. The story's pretty simple. Paul receives a vision in a dream, calling him to take the good news to some place far away, to – Philippi.

Now, as destinations go, I doubt Philippi would have been high on anyone's list. Philippi just wasn't the kind of place where people would want to hear about Christ. Philippi started off as a little one-horse town, but the people of Philippi had made themselves the leading city in the district by hard work. They didn't need Paul's God. They had plenty of gods already. So when Paul came to this city I imagine he threw his arms up and said, "What on earth can I do here?!?"

Now, I want you to notice carefully what Paul – possibly the most famous evangelist of all time – did NOT do when he got there. He didn't buy cable TV time to do televangelism. He didn't put up a tent to conduct a revival (even though he was a tentmaker by trade). He didn't stand out on a street corner asking people if they're certain they'll go to heaven if they die tonight.

Paul the evangelist did none of the things we in our day often associate with evangelism. Instead, Paul learns that just outside the city, along the riverbank, some of the Jewish people, women, mostly, gathered on the Sabbath for prayer. They didn't have a synagogue, but they got together to talk about God, and to pray, and to worship.

And along with the Jewish women, there was a smattering of non-Jews too, spiritually curious gentiles, notably a local businesswoman named Lydia, a seller, we're told, of "purple cloth."

Now, we're told only four things about Lydia. Firstly, that she was a spiritual seeker as evidenced by her interest in these Sabbath Day discussions "down by the riverside." Secondly, that when Paul added his voice to the discussion and talked about Jesus, she responded. Thirdly, her response was to get baptised, and she brought along her whole household, family members and employees alike, and then fourthly, she opened her home to the church. She said to Paul, "Come and stay at my house," and when Paul left Philippi a couple of weeks later, the church was meeting there.

For a church to grow it has to, first of all, be a setting that embraces and encourages spiritual curiosity. Those folks who gathered at the river were looking for something. They wanted to worship God, but they also welcomed people who weren't so sure, who had questions. Questions are OK!

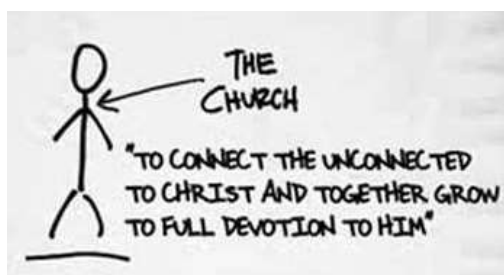
I'm thinking you know the questions. The ones that come to us when we're lying awake at night, or sitting in the emergency room, or reading a puzzling passage of scripture, or just talking with friends who think differently than we do. Most of us *do* live outside the circle of theological certainty. And we feel uneasy about it; sometimes, because the church has told us that doubt is a sign of spiritual weakness; other times just because it's scary when we venture beyond what we've always been told.

And yet, gathered there by the riverside in Philippi was a group of people that, in true rabbinical fashion, got together to talk, and ask questions, and explore. We gentiles lost something when we moved away from our Jewish roots. You see, the synagogue was never a place for mere one-sided teaching and preaching. It was a setting for dialogue, and exploration. And the result is that hearts get stirred up, and minds are provoked to think new thoughts, and people are made ready for *spiritual growth!* That's part of what makes a new church! Spiritual growth!

So here in *our* church we need to be a community that embraces and encourages spiritual curiosity. So if you're curious about God and life and faith, you've come to the right place, and we encourage you to ask the hard questions and to explore the deepest mysteries of life. We don't promise answers, but we promise God's companionship, and ours, on the journey.

Second, the church has to be a setting where stories of love are told. I'm not just talking about the stories in the bible. You have stories of love and these stories need to be told! They need to be shared! We just have to keep telling the stories. God will do the rest.

Now, there's a **third reason that little church in Philippi grew.** The book of Acts tells us that



Lydia brought her entire household to be baptized. In that time and place, that meant not just her immediate family, but everyone else, her servants, everyone around her, people of all genders, classes, and ways of life. And in the same way, we need to bring those around us, and open our ministry to *whoever will come!*

As a church, we need to be as all-encompassing as the love of God!

There are some churches that seem to think you have to have your faith pretty much together and in order before you can come. But that's not how it was in the early church. They hadn't yet built up the walls of doctrines that, when you think about it, are mainly intended to keep the chaff from getting all mixed up with the good grain. But our job as a church is not to protect ourselves from unbelievers, and not to just accumulate people who are already perfect Christians. **Our job is to seek out the chaff, those who are outside the experience of the grace that we know.** And welcome those who are *not* perfect, and to provide a space where they *can* be curious and ask their questions, and where they *can* hear the stories of grace, and grow as the Spirit leads. And then those stories will become a source of VISION, not doctrine.

That mission is to create a place where spiritual curiosity is embraced and encouraged; a setting where real-life stories of grace are shared; a community whose arms are wide open in love to any one, in any condition. Isn't that a wonderful image of what a church should be like? **We should be a setting where doors and hearts are always open, where gifts are generously given, and where love is always found. Open curiosity! Shared experiences! Radical inclusiveness!**

So crank up your curiosity, dust off your stories, open wide your arms, and get ready to be a New Church!

CHURCH *is not*
A BUILDING YOU GO TO,
IT IS *a family* YOU BELONG TO