

“Paul’s Vision; Lydia’s Conversion”

26 May 2019: 6th Sunday of Easter

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571

Preaching Text: Acts 16:11-15

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“The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but no vision”

(—Helen Keller).

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It is safe to say that our church has as long and loving loving arms as any community church. Not to blow too much smoke in your direction, but our church, does as much as any other village church. Yet—and this is the kicker—we rarely see the objects of our kindness worship with us. Why? Perhaps, part of it is in the way we regard/practice evangelism. Evangelism, in E. Stanley Jones’ famous phrase, is “one hungry beggar showing another hungry beggar where food is.”

Of course, for many up-to-date and sophisticated people—like us—evangelism is a tarnished word. We all know people who “buttonhole” others, asking: “Are you saved?” For the secular, this seems as invasive as asking about someone’s sex life or finances. So, let us focus on the question prompted by a biblical concept of evangelism. It is not a bad word. Rather, it is a word that describes the church’s primary function—to offer bread to a starving world. Hear our lesson, Acts 16:11-15:

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 (Acts 16:11-15).

Worship was important to biblical writers—especially Luke. In Luke 4:16 we read: “When Jesus came to Nazareth . . . he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.” Thus, Jesus attended synagogue regularly and often. Paul too follows this practice noted in Acts 17:1-3: “They came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days argued with them from the scriptures.” Yet, today’s lesson, recounts that “On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer.” Evidently in Philippi there was no synagogue and perhaps only a few Jews. “Place of prayer” (“Τόπος προσευχής”) technically signifies where Jewish people worshiped where no synagogue existed. Thus, Paul went “down by the riverside.”

Upon arrival, Paul and his companions spoke to the gathered women. Lydia, after God opened her heart, received baptism as a sign of conversion. Afterward, Lydia invited the apostles to her home. I would like to address three aspects of our lesson. First, notice the straightforward evangelistic interplay between Paul’s companions and the women at the place of prayer. No doubt Paul shared the good news of Jesus with those assembled because they were eager to hear. Some modern Christians are skeptical that such people exist today. We offer many reasons for not sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ with

people for a variety of reasons. These reasons we have believed so long that we now actually think they hold water.

For example, we are sometimes evasive about evangelism because we think all church work is evangelism. If so, then we think God does not call us to witnesses. Plainly, everything that the church does should be evangelistic. We invite people to Christ or we have no reason to exist. Yet, we need to put ourselves directly in the path of those who need abundant life. Conceivably, we may introduce these folks to Jesus. Some avoid evangelism because of an insecure faith. Others avoid sharing the gospel because they think it displays bad manners to broach the subject. We also fear it may come across as “uncouth.” We are likewise afraid of appearing to manipulate people. Yet, parents try to persuade disinclined youngsters to do things that offer tools to foster better lives. The women to whom Paul and his companions spoke heard the good news. The shame would have been if Paul failed to speak out of evasion, fear of seeming manipulative, or afraid that the women thought him rude.

A second consideration is that new methods, such as Paul and his companions used, are always essential. If we look to medicine, for an example, doctors now employ many practices today that people considered experimental only a few years ago. New times call for new measures. John Wesley’s field preaching is another such example. Wesley took the gospel to the people. He would preach regularly at 5:00 a.m. to miners departing after the night shift in the coal mines. Wesley preached at the Kingswood mine’s entrance to many who felt too poor or ashamed to attend a church.

A good method to evangelize Salado people is via our first-rate Sunday School program. We have strong classes and able teachers. As people enter small groups, they get to know others. They have fellow believers to whom they feel they can relate. Our Sunday School program is one of the best and most effective ways to draw people to Christ. In so doing, we follow Wesley’s example of putting people into small groups—bands, classes, and societies—to have their spiritual needs met. We often forget that in church history the notion of Christian education through Sunday school is a rather recent notion. It is also an evangelistic tool that suits our social instincts.

A third item to consider in terms of evangelism is that we have good news to share. The good news is, that nobody wants to be a part of an organization that does not have high expectations. Everybody wants to be part of something that has high expectations, has accountability that makes demands on us, and pulls/grows us.

Perhaps you have heard that when leaders set high expectations, then followers rise to meet them.

Well, there’s a concept called the “Pygmalion Effect” which says that the lower the expectations, the worse people do. In an interesting experiment (Eden & Shani, 1982) in a 15-week combat command course, trainees were matched on aptitude and then randomly put in 1 of 3 groups.

Each group had different expectations, high, average, and no specified expectations. But 4 days before the trainees arrived, the instructors were told that each trainee had a score based on psychological tests, data from a prior leadership courses, and ratings by prior commanders. This score (known as command potential or CP) represents the trainee’s potential to command others.

Also, instructors were told that the course grades predict command potential (CP) in 95% of the cases. Later, instructors were each given a list of their trainees.

The Pygmalion hypothesis confirmed that the instructor's prior expectation (based on what they thought were a high or low CP score for each trainee) influenced the trainee's performance. Trainees whose instructors expected high performance scored significantly higher on objective achievement tests, exhibited more positive attitudes, and were thus better leaders (<https://workplacepsychology.net/2011/02/05/>).

Part of Wesley's genius was, that not only was he purveyor of the gospel, not only was he an organizational genius, but what he instilled in Methodist Christians. He offered a sense of accountability. Somebody holds us to some kind of standard. That standard at the minimum is that we never take the church of Jesus Christ casually. You and I are part of an organization, whose standard is so high that it is beyond anything of this world. Our standard is Jesus Christ. Jesus is our referent, not the standards of the world, not even the best of our world. Our criterion of conduct, fellowship, ministry, proclamation, and evangelism is Jesus Christ. Everybody wants to be a part of something that calls out our best with God's help. Everybody does.

When the church of Jesus presents itself in ways that people cannot or must not take it casually, then there will not be an empty pew anywhere. People want into an organization like that. If we are casual and lackadaisical about our own discipleship and stewardship and opportunities to share the gospel with other people, then our own participation devastates Christ's gospel. In the end it is devastating to us and inevitably it means death. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these things. God forbid, God help us to never take the church of Jesus Christ casually. Evangelism means we share with others the "bread of life" that we ourselves have found. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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