

## Title: “The Messiness of Discipleship”

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Acts 16:9-15

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**Service Readings:** Acts 16:9–15, Rev. 21:9–14, 21–27, John 16:23–33

*The mission of our church is straight forward and straight from Jesus. We are tasked with making disciples and we do it by making caring connections with each other and with those in the communities surrounding us. This directive sounds simple enough, “go and make disciples by caring for others,” but becomes complicated and messy the moment you begin to take your first step.*

### Message:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

The mission of our church is straight forward and straight from Jesus. We are tasked with making disciples and we do it by making caring connections with each other and with those in the communities surrounding us. This directive sounds simple enough, “go and make disciples by caring for others,” but becomes complicated and messy the moment you begin to take your first step.

Here are just a few examples that come to my mind:

- What, *exactly*, is a disciple?
- Am I even one?
- And how do I make one?
- Wait. Before that, how do I *find* a potential disciple?
- And when I *find* one, what do I say?
- And what if they don't respond the way I want them to?
- Or what if they *do* respond and become one of those overly-enthusiastic new Christians that won't stop calling and following me?

You see? It can get messy very fast. And this messiness can, if left unresolved, become a stumbling block to responding to the commission given to us by Christ and adopted by our church. And in the end it can leave us paralyzed, unable to take even a single step. And so this is one of the reasons why we have been intentional about discussing our mission and vision over these past several years. As the world has begun to reopen, we have resumed our conversations and now meet several times a year to collaborate what it means to fulfill our mission. We answer the questions together about what a disciple is and how we are called to develop them. Our aim is to ensure that no one feels paralyzed with uncertainty about what Jesus wants us to do and how he wants us to do it. The reason I bring this up is because I want to use it as a backdrop for the passage from Acts that we read this morning. Here it is, again:

<sup>9</sup> And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” <sup>10</sup> And when Paul<sup>□</sup> had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. <sup>11</sup> So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct

voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis,<sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the<sup>13</sup> district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.<sup>13</sup> And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together.<sup>14</sup> One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.<sup>15</sup> And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

It doesn't seem like Paul had any ambiguity about what made a disciple. And he clearly wasn't paralyzed in any way. Indeed, he had a vision, and immediately answered that call and left for Macedonia. Once there, he happened upon some women who were praying and he conversed with them. A woman, Lydia, overheard the conversation, the Holy Spirit opened her heart, and she was baptized. It doesn't seem to get more straight forward than that! There seems to be no messiness at all!

Ah, but there was. Quite a bit, actually. Here is what we didn't read:

- *Before* this trip to Macedonia, Paul and Timothy were prohibited by the Holy Spirit to spread the Gospel in Asia.
- And then were withheld *again* when they tried to travel to modern day Turkey.
- This is where the passage picks up. Through a vision they are called to this remote location under Roman rule.
- And what follows *after* this section is Paul and Silas getting arrested and beaten with rods and then thrown into prison.
- And then an earthquake, prison doors that miraculously open, a jailer who wants to commit suicide, Paul's intercession, and then this jailer's baptism.

As Paul Harvey would say, "now you know the rest of the story!"

It would seem, then, that Christian discipleship is going to be messy. There is just no way around it. But the goal is not to escape it but to see the Holy Spirit's work and guidance in all the messiness. When we do that, we can learn to embrace it, or at least accept it because we know that it is a sign of a healthy and active Christian life. So how do we do this? To me there are three main ideas that are presented in our reading this morning, specifically surrounding Lydia's baptism. And the timing couldn't be more perfect because today we (**will celebrate / have just celebrated**) the baptism of baby Henry and we can see these same ideas surrounding his life as well.

The first concept that I want to draw your attention to is the collaboration between the Holy Spirit and the various characters. Paul's desire was to spread the gospel to Asia and Turkey but the Holy Spirit directed him to Macedonia. He was free to ignore the promptings of the Spirit, but he didn't. Instead, he responded to these promptings by the Holy Spirit and followed where he was led. We see a similar situation between the Holy Spirit and Lydia. While Paul was preaching, the Holy Spirit was prompting her heart open. This led to her baptism. What about today? How might we collaborate with the Holy Spirit in our own lives? These past few years have given us ample opportunities to make disciples. We have been invited into a partnership with the Holy Spirit as we

engaged with our current culture and the stresses and pressures between various groups. We have been offered the opportunities to bring the message of the gospel into the lives of people who we may not have agreed with but who were just as nervous as we were. And just because the pandemic seems to be disappearing, that doesn't mean that the opportunities are. There are still great political and cultural divides that we can use to introduce and reintroduce people to Christ.

The second concept that is illustrated in this passage is that of relationships. Paul didn't bring God into Macedonia, God was already there, already working in the lives of Lydia and those around her. Paul simply met Jesus where he was at, and then participated in what he was already doing. It wasn't Paul who found Lydia, but Jesus who found her. And he just used the Holy Spirit to lead Paul not just to her but *into* the messiness of her life. With just this chance and simple interaction Paul became involved, even just briefly, in the life of Lydia, and because of that heaven won a new convert. You see, the goal is not about finding new citizens for Christ's kingdom. No. The goal is to announce and give witness to what has already been done. And to do that we have to be interested, and get involved, in the lives of those we spread the message to. And when we take the time to create a relationship, we can then share that Jesus has died for the sins of all and has risen from the dead and that we are free to live in the promises of eternal life that this reality offers.

The third concept, and the one that is most comforting to me, is that it is invitational. The Holy Spirit invites us to participate in Christ's work. He invites us into these sometimes messy relationships with those around us *so that* we have the opportunity to tell people not just about the work of Jesus but even more than that, to facilitate a personal connection directly between God and that person. We get to show them *who* they really are! They are children of God, adopted and loved. What a wonderful invitation the Holy Spirit has given us, that we could be part of this work!

All this to say that when we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us, and when we see our role in making disciples as collaborative, relational, and invitational, the messiness no longer interferes with the work that we are called to do. We are able to participate in the work that the Holy Spirit is already doing in the lives of those around us. We can reach out into the community and make connections that will help others recognize their true identity – an identity given to them by God. When we see that it is not our work that brings about success, but the Holy Spirit's work, and when we see that it is not our goal to convert but to be the messengers, the anxiety and hesitation melts away and we no longer become distracted by the messiness of our commission. Isn't that comforting?

Please pray with me.

Lord help us to serve Your people for You only. Give us humble and pure hearts that we may show love and grace to Your people as You have shown to us. Let us serve You and others unselfishly and wholeheartedly. We ask that You keep us grounded daily in You and Your ways that we may be worthy representatives of you.

Amen.