

Easter 6

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Texts: Acts 16:9-15

It seems as though very often we wind up where we never thought we'd be. One of the realities for us as people living in the early 21st century and as residents of a university town is that life can often be nomadic and transitional. People come and go, as witnessed by the exodus from Ames by students finishing finals this week. And for us, well, many of us have made a sojourn to live here, never having dreamed, hoped, or even suspected that we would wind up residing in the center of Iowa.

Growing up, my family moved frequently. So much so that I ended up attending four different schools between kindergarten and fourth grade. When my family moved to a Minneapolis suburb in the middle of my fourth grade year, I put my foot down. I told my parents that they could go ahead and move again if they wanted to, but I was staying with the house. (And apparently they took that to heart; they still live there!)

And as I reflect on my adult life to this point, it has been a series of journeys to unexpected and unforeseen places. I never thought I'd go to seminary, so I was surprised to find myself there in St. Paul. I had never been to Michigan's Upper Peninsula before interviewing and being called to serve in a congregation there. And Karen and I never anticipated moving to Ames before receiving a phone call from Bethesda several autumns ago.

My story is not at all unique, for I know that many – if not most – of you have had similar experiences in your lives. So we know what it's like to wind up in unexpected places among unfamiliar faces. And we also know that it doesn't take a U-Haul to find ourselves in new places among new faces.

So we can understand what it was like for Paul and his companions as they set out on their travels. Our reading from Acts today tells of Paul receiving a vision of a man from Macedonia, begging for Paul to come and help.

Whatever Paul's original itinerary was, he reoriented his GPS and we heard of his updated travelogue: leaving from Troas in modern-day Turkey and sailing to the island of Samothrace before traveling through Neapolis and finally ending up in the region of Macedonia in the city of Philippi, which is in modern-day Greece. (So he went from Turkey to Greece. There's gotta be a joke in there someplace about deep fat-fried poultry, but I'll resist it for now.)

And just as we have to navigate the cultural differences when we are in a new and strange place, Paul and his traveling companions surely had to orient themselves to Philippi, asking the important questions. You know, questions such as, where can we worship? Or, do people call it "pop" or "soda" here? Is it legal to make a right

turn on red? Is it called a “bubbler” or a “drinking fountain” here? Do people play “Duck, Duck, Goose” or “Duck, Duck, Gray Duck”? And, of course, when invited to a potluck, does a person bring a “hot dish” or a “casserole”?

Interestingly the text today is silent on the answers to all those questions except the first one. And here we learn a very important detail: on the Sabbath, the group went *outside* the city gate to find a place of prayer for worship. This is important because outside is a place to which God calls people. And outside can be both a literal and a figurative place.

I would like to point out that the text never tells us if Paul finds the Macedonian man from his vision. I mean, that’s what set him on this course that landed him in Philippi, but nary a word more is spoken of this man. Why is this?

Well, just as we wind up in unexpected places, we also encounter unexpected people. While we never hear of the man from Macedonia, we do meet Lydia outside the city gate at that place of prayer.

This is the only time we hear of Lydia in the Bible. Acts 16:14 tells us that she was a worshiper of God who was listening to Paul and his companions. She was originally from Thyatira. Additionally, she was a dealer in purple cloth, which was a fabric only able to be worn by the upper or ruling class. And we also hear that she was the head of her household.

So we have this great interaction between Paul, the church insider who was an outsider in Philippi, and Lydia, the Philippian insider who was a church outsider. This interaction took place outside the city gate, but also outside the cultural expectations and religious norms of their day. It was risky, perhaps even dangerous, for them to interact.

Yet we hear that it was God at work in all of this. Verse 10 tells us that God called Paul to these travels and verse 14 tells us that God opened Lydia’s heart to hear the good news of Jesus Christ that Paul brought.

This is one instance of the biblical basis for what can be called “gospel hospitality.” I’d like to point out the new issue of *The Lutheran* magazine, which centers on hospitality. (And this issue features an article about Bethesda, related to hospitality. You can pick up a copy at the Welcome Center today! Get ‘em while they’re hot!)

The cover article is titled “Hospitality: It takes guts.” And it does. In the article, the definition of hospitality is pushed beyond just a handshake and a nice smile. Amy Oden says, “*Gospel hospitality* says we have something to offer that is good news. It’s not mere friendliness but welcoming people with the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.”

I think it is important for us to be clear why gospel hospitality is such a risky proposition for us today. There are two things for us to be aware of.

First, it's a risk due to the authenticity and integrity required by gospel hospitality. The integrity in the scene in Acts today is that for both Paul and Lydia, their faith is fully integrated into their daily lives at home and work. I mean, Paul was a traveling missionary and tentmaker on the side, so that one's pretty clear, but the text gives us the details of Lydia's professional life as a small business owner and her personal life as a homeowner. And, at God's urging, her heart is opened to Jesus Christ, she is baptized along with the rest of her household and she opens her home to be the base of Paul's Philippian ministry.

So for us, this means that God calls us to have a faith centered in worship that is lived out in daily life at work and at home.

Instead of compartmentalizing our lives to say, "Okay, this is God and church stuff, and this is work stuff, and this is school stuff, and this is home stuff and this is a closet full of stuff I don't know what to do with but I know I can't get rid of it," – instead of that we open ourselves to see God at work in all of it. To see God leading us to new people. To see God opening our hearts in unexpected ways. To see God pushing us outside so we can extend gospel hospitality to whomever we encounter.

Second, this is risky because gospel hospitality means that we break down – or at least go around – social barriers created between people. We like to draw lines of division between people, don't we? There are countless examples.

- Liberal/conservative/moderate
- ISU/Iowa/UNI
- Packers/Vikings/Bears
- Dog people/cat people
- Team Edward/Team Jacob (If you don't get this, ask a teenager.)

No, seriously, though, walk down the halls of any high school to see lines of division. Or drive around most any town. (Think of the phrase, "the other side of the tracks.") Or look at your company's organizational chart. Or we can pay attention to issues near and far, be it about folks from Chicago moving here or about what's going on in Arizona right now.

Yet gospel hospitality says that God's love goes beyond divisions between people. As Robert Wall puts it, "God's saving grace dismantles various social barriers that cultivate strife between people."

It's what we see in our Acts text today. It is by God's grace that Paul offers the good news of Jesus Christ and that, following her baptism, Lydia offers her home to Paul and his companions. They were showing gospel hospitality to one another.

So we too ought to extend gospel hospitality by moving outside the barriers and boundaries around and between us. For the reality is that someone has shown gospel hospitality to us in some way or another. That's why any of us are here today, for each one of us was an outsider at some time, for life continually involves moving from the outside in and the inside out.

And so, God calls us to keep taking our faith outside.

- Outside the walls of this building.
- Outside our cliques and comfort zones.
- Outside our routines.
- Outside the idea that the church is an exclusive club.
- Outside the social barriers or borders we've drawn.
- Outside a little God box we visit on Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

For God calls us to take our faith out into the vast expanse of every moment and every aspect of our lives.

Yes, this is risky. I won't deny that. But we have been entrusted with something so valuable and precious: the good news of God in Christ Jesus, a word of hope to a weary world, and a community of belonging for strangers in a strange place.

Because the thing about faith is that we often wind up where we never thought we'd be. We find ourselves in unexpected places among unexpected people. And, it turns out, that's just the way God intends it to be!

Amen