

Get the Picture?
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 26, 2019
Acts 16:9-15
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Acts 16:9-15 (NRSV)

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.

The Conversion of Lydia

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^[a] 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.

Last Friday was Aldersgate Day – a day remembering THE day that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism felt "his heart strangely warmed" and his salvation assured. He went out from that prayer meeting that night "on fire" to preach the Good News to crowds of people, most of whom he'd never met, all over England, Ireland and colonial America.

God's time is so good!

That Aldersgate is remembered this weekend and we hear the verses from Acts that Mel just read.

I heard a preacher recently say, "Use your sacred imaginations with me."
Let's try that.

Imagine a person, let's call her "Margaret," (I actually Googled "popular names in the 1940's" to come up with that one) who is a good, faithful Christian.

She attends church almost every Sunday.

She signs up to volunteer for this and that – **AND SHE SHOWS UP** to work.

She also attends special church services and Bible study classes.

Dang! Margaret is *something*, wouldn't you agree?

Yet, somehow, she feels like something is missing.

She senses, even fears a little bit, that despite all of her activity at church, she's not much different from her friends "Beverly" and "Linda" (also Googled) who **don't** attend church at all. They're busy with yoga classes and going to soccer games or (gasp and say it isn't so) just sleeping in instead.

Now, keeping that sacred imagination going, picture another scene.

A few first-century travelers set out on a journey.

They are on fire with the Holy Spirit.

Conditions are tough, money is tight, and everywhere they go they meet opposition.

Despite all this, they have conviction and faith.

Then, one night, one of them has a vision that they believe is calling them to proclaim the Good News in a way different than they had initially thought.

And they immediately change their plans and set off in a new direction.

Wow – just when we thought "Margaret" was a Christian powerhouse we encounter the faith and dedication of these travelers. THEY have got some kind of commitment to share Jesus Christ with others.

That's where we are in the Scripture passage that Mel just read for us.

Scholars of the Book of Acts, call this the Apostle Paul's second missionary journey.

On his first journey, Paul traveled (with Barnabas) to Galatia (and other towns). They shared the gospel and planted new churches of new believers.

This trip, the second missionary journey, Paul is traveling with Silas and they think a good plan would be to retrace that first journey; kind of check-in on the folks Paul had ministered to and see how they were doing.

And, so far so good, Paul and Silas had been pretty successful. They had been able to visit some of the places, but unable to visit others.

Ever had a trip like that?

Sure we have! There is construction in Colorado Springs!

We can't get across the city without a GPS re-route of our travel!

Anyway, Paul and Silas are now in Troas, when Paul has a vision.

Acting on that vision, because they're heeding "divine intervention" Paul and Silas re-route their travel *and their intention*, which will eventually lead to the baptism of Lydia mentioned at the end of today's passage.

When we look and compare our "Margaret" (an ardent follower of Christ) with early church followers like Paul, we can't help but see *there's something* different.

I think we can agree that, Jesus' early followers lived lives that were seemingly "on fire" with and guided by the Holy Spirit.

"Margaret" and her contemporaries (**and us**) seem to lack that fire.

Not all of us, but most, just don't have passion and conviction.

Now, perhaps the difference is because followers of Jesus in the early church were clear about what they were called to do.

They'd been eyewitnesses to Jesus' ministry and in Paul's case had a "come to Jesus" meeting that didn't leave any doubt about Paul's ministry.

Today's many of us can admit: We don't have that clear vision.

Cheap plug: We're studying the Gifts of the Spirit, right before worship and you could be learning, with us, more about using our personalized gifts to build up the Kingdom of God.

Now, back to our regular programming....

Those early church builders and members were clear that they were to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ. It says in verse 10: they were "*convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.*"

We're nearing the end of the Season of Easter.

In just two Sundays we'll celebrate Pentecost.

And I'm praying that we'll celebrate not only the date in the church calendar but the reviving of our awareness of the Spirit around PPUMC.

Pentecost, remember, is the day when the Jesus-promised Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and many others who were with them in Jerusalem.

Chronologically, it hasn't been "that long" since the fire of impassioned speaking and empowered ministry had come over Jesus' disciples and then Paul and his disciples and all the audiences that they had.

There was evangelism going on!

And teaching.

And learning.

The Spirit was moving in the early church.

So how do we rekindle the fire like Paul's?

Two weeks away from the celebration is NOT too early to get started!

How can we leave here and *know, really know* we've been called to lead others to a relationship with Jesus Christ?

Paul and his partners give us some good instructions for us to explore as we seek to reclaim and increase OUR passionate and fiery faith.

For example, Paul proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ by listening for, and acting on, God's word.

If we are to rediscover the fire of the early Christians, we, like Paul, have to be willing to listen and act on God's word.

How are we doing?

Do we take the time to talk ***and*** listen to God through regular prayer?

Are we doing the listening part?

And, when we sense that God is leading us in a certain direction, do we test out that direction by asking others, whom we trust, to verify those holy urges with us?

Do we check in God's Word for guidance?

And then, if we have confirmed the nudges that God IS asking us to do something, are we bold enough to act?

Or do we let fear, complacency, soccer games or sleeping in stand in the way?

We've gotta listen for, trust in, and act on God's guiding will in our lives if we're going to reignite a fire in our faith.

Another way Paul proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ was by going to where the people were.

John Wesley, said often, "*The **world** is my parish*" and he went...a lot...to find the fields filled with people needing to hear the Word of God about Jesus Christ.

Listen again to a couple of verses from today's reading:

"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."

Paul and Silas didn't stay in a synagogue.

They didn't put up a sign and wait for people to come.

They didn't even stay IN town.

They went **out** to where the people were!

I make this suggestion often.

It bears repeating: If we're going to rediscover the fire of the early Christians, we've got to get outside THIS box.

We can't wait for people to come to us. ***Why would they?***

Instead, and I'm becoming clearer on this point, we've got to get better at pin-pointing the needs of people, the places where there's hurt, and where God's love would be BIG NEWS.

God's love has made changes in our lives – wouldn't it be refreshing to share THAT with others rather than complaints?

Letting others know about forgiveness and eternal life with Jesus is our personal responsibility as Christians.

There is no doubt that the world (won't even small-it-down to our country or even our neighborhood...) ...the world is decreasingly religious, so finding new ways to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ beyond our church building is mandatory. And when we do it, we'll find the fire of faith rekindled.

Finally (for today) Paul didn't limit WHO he was proclaimed the Good News of Jesus Christ to.

His vision was "*a man of Macedonia* who asked him to come over and help..."

However, as we read on, Paul instead finds "*certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.*"

Are you ready for a rekindled Spirit? Then we can't limit God by defining who we're going to reach out to. There's someone, an unexpected someone, who might be longing for the transformative message of Christ's love, and we may have to risk to be able to share the message.

Is God already nudging you to share your faith with someone?

Remember "Margaret", the woman we imagined earlier, who was feeling as if she wasn't growing and changing despite all her church activities? Even with all *her* faith, there are people among us, like "Margaret" (or for the guys: "Marty") who aren't living in the spiritual transformation they'd hoped for.

Someone once said, "*They came to us seeking God, and we gave them church instead.*"

Even with our best intentions sometimes we lose our focus and think that church activity or busy-ness is the same as finding those avenues for spiritual growth that will transform.

And hear me now, I'm not just talking about the folks we're called to lead to Jesus. IT'S THE SAME FOR US, when we become the ol' "frozen chosen".

Let's help each other remember to focus on ensuring that our activities are aligned with God's purpose for us to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul is still preaching to us by an example of proclaiming that Good News:

- by discerning and acting on God's will
- by reaching out beyond our church walls
- and by being ready to share the gospel message with an unexpected person

Think about those things – and not only will **others** be transformed but the “Margaret's” (and “Marty's,) that we ARE, will have the smoldering embers of our faith stoked into burning flames.

Let's pray, remembering Aldersgate Day:

Almighty God, in a time of great need

You raised up Your servant John Wesley,
and by Your Spirit inspired him to kindle a flame of sacred love which leaped and ran, like an inextinguishable blaze.

Grant that our hearts may be warmed too, and continually refreshed by Your grace.

May we be, like Wesley, devoted to the increase of holiness based on Your Word, that in this our time of great need, Your will may fully and effectively be done on earth as it is in heaven; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.