

SERMON: Lessons from Lydia

TEXT: Acts 16:9-15

They say that hindsight is 20-20. The meaning, of course, is that when you look at your life – or just a particular turn of events – you see it and understand it best once it's behind you.

I remember attending my 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion. Even though I was married with children by that time, I was nervous about seeing my high school sweetheart. Paul and I had dated for eleven years, from the time we were sixteen years old, so I had been pretty certain that the path was set for us. But, after years of patient waiting – or blind foolishness on my part – our path came to a dead end. I was devastated, and I really felt as though God had let me down.

Anticipating that reunion, I wasn't sure how I would feel when I saw Paul again. Well, shortly after I arrived with my husband, Paul crossed the room with his wife and greeted me. We hugged. Chatted cordially. Introduced our spouses. And five minutes later when he walked away, I thought to myself, "Oh, thank God! Thank you, God, for saving me from marrying that man!"

Hindsight is 20-20. Looking back on that relationship that I was so sure about, I was now grateful that it ended when it did.

This story also falls under the category of “the best laid plans of mice and men.” Sometimes I think as we plan and prepare and strategize and set goals, God looks down and chuckles, saying, “Good luck with that.”

The Apostle Paul was not planning on traveling to Macedonia when he did. One New Testament scholar commented that Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus was not the only time that God intervened and changed his direction. “As in chapter 9, God sets Paul’s course in Acts 16 through a vision by vetoing Paul’s strategic plan. After being forbidden to travel to Asia (v. 6) and Bithynia (v. 7), Paul hears *a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’* (v. 9). The route Paul finds himself on is *to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony*” (v. 12). This Spirit-led route – sailing from Troas and straight to Samothrace, then to Neapolis (v. 11) – brings Paul to Europe for the first time to continue witnessing to the gospel *to the ends of the earth* (Acts 1:8).” (David G. Forney, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2, p. 476)

It was a vision that inspired Paul to change his plans, and he was convinced that the vision was from God.

Further surprises had Paul and his companions happening upon a place of prayer and a group of women who had gathered there. Of course, under normal circumstances they would not have even bothered wasting their time on women.

More unusual still is that Lydia was one of these women. She was an enigma in her day. An unmarried, self-supporting businesswoman whose clientele were among the elite, she might have turned the tables on Paul, not bothering to waste her time on him! Instead, as a Gentile worshiping the God of the Jews, Lydia was seeking more, and she listened to Paul proclaim the good news.

Paul's "best laid plans" had been re-routed to this road less traveled.

Another theologian wrote, "It almost did not happen, this meeting of the businesswoman and the missionaries, and it surely would not have happened were it not for the inexplicable convergence of human faithfulness and divine guidance. Paul and Lydia and the Holy Spirit all work together in this event, this *chance* encounter by the river. Paul would not have been guided to this place at this

moment, were he not first of all at God's disposal, open to being guided, sensitively attuned to being steered in one direction and away from all others. Lydia would not have arrived at this place or time, had she not first of all been a worshiper of God, a seeker already on her way." The center of the story, according to this writer, is "the moment of intersection between human obedience and divine initiative." (Ronald Cole-Turner, Feasting on the Word, Year C., Vol. 2, 476)

The LESSONS FROM LYDIA include looking and listening and praying and following.

If you're listening, you might hear in this story itself a message from God that seems particularly suited for First Presbyterian Church in Cape Girardeau. Listen again as I read verse 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."

I believe some of you – perhaps many of you – in this congregation, by looking and listening and praying, received a vision from God about a *place of prayer* outside the gate *by the river*. Perhaps you didn't even realize that this was

God's plan until just now. We have created our Peace Park as a place of prayer, outside by the river, and our steps have been guided by God.

Having heard Paul's words of life, love, and salvation through Christ, Lydia shared this good news and was baptized, along with her family and probably her servants, as well. And then she opened her home in hospitality to the missionaries, insisting they stay with her while in Philippi. In doing so, she became one of them, "a new convert already in the business of converting others." Her home became a place not just for entertaining family and friends, but for receiving outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests. Lydia went above and beyond the expected standards of hospitality, and her home became the spiritual center for the entire city and "a base for the spread of Christianity in Europe." (Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word, Year C., Vol. 2, 478*)

Now that the Peace Park is complete, we are called to make it a place of hospitality and welcome. A place where strangers become friends. A place where people share their faith. A place where the broken are made whole, where the outcast find acceptance, where the empty find fulfillment, and where peace comes to life through acts of justice. I believe God is inspiring us and empowering us and challenging us to provide a radical hospitality that makes the Peace Park a spiritual center for the City of Cape Girardeau.

I understand, the word “radical” makes us nervous. It makes me nervous, too. But just to be clear, I didn’t start this sermon with a radical message in mind. Just as Paul did not plan to go to Macedonia, I did not plan to discuss hospitality as one of the lessons we learn from Lydia. Am I claiming to be following a vision as Paul was? Not necessarily. And yet, I know that the Holy Spirit often gives me words that I wasn’t expecting. It’s as if they are flowing through my fingers from my heart and soul, without stopping first to be screened by my brain.

Careful thought and planning are necessary, of course, and the Session is discussing how our Peace Park should – and should not – be used. But as always, we all would benefit from being open to God’s guidance in all that we do, in every decision we make, in every path we take.

May our every prayer be lifted with an attitude of openness, with open ears and eyes, open hearts, and open minds. And may our vision going forward be clear, that our lives and ministry may be to the glory of God!

AMEN.