

May 26, 2019

Acts 16: 6-15

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“Opening Our Hearts”

Phrygia and Galatia, Mysia and Bithynia, Neapolis and Macedonia...it all sounds Greek to us and there is good reason for that. It is Greek, these strange sounding names of places we've never heard of and where we've never been. In a bible study this past week, I mentioned I was glad I wasn't the scripture reader for today and grateful Katya was going to be at the microphone for this one. She's a linguistic expert. She is one of the few among us who is fluent in multiple languages and it seems this is what it takes to read aloud this morning's scripture. It's challenging, just to know how to say the words, and because of that we might give up on this scripture even before we get started. This would be unfortunate because to give up on our passage is to miss it's straightforward message for today. The bible is giving us more than just the names of strange sounding places. We're given the names of places so we will know and experience the power that was at work in those places. That power is the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the clear and direct message God gives us today. The Holy Spirit was on the move in the days of the Apostle Paul guiding his mission and shaping the community of the early church. As we read through the Book of Acts, it is clear Paul and the others didn't stay in one place for very long. Their goal was to carry the good news of Jesus Christ into world. It's estimated that Paul traveled over 10,000 miles. He went all that way not because he loved adventure but because the Spirit compelled him to move. This is where God wants us to make a connection between Paul's life and our own. You see, Holy Spirit power didn't just happen long ago. The Holy Spirit still moves. I want to pause here to underline this point. The Holy Spirit still moves. This is important because when we read a passage like the one for today we often approach it like a study project. We examine it to learn what happened in that ancient time. This is a noble cause. We should learn about the historical context of what was happening. Phrygia and Galatia, Mysia and Bithynia, Neapolis and Macedonia; ancient geography and history lessons tell the story, and it's important get that right. But knowing what happened back then is only part of the story. In the way God led the early believers so, too, God is leading us. The bible is a living word. In this way, the bible is not only speaking to us about what God did in the past but preparing us to hear what God is doing in us now. The Spirit is moving in specific places and in particular moments in our lives. I've discovered that to some the name "Powell" sounds strange. Not long ago I was talking to a guy who was not familiar with where I am from. "Where's your church?" he asked. "Powell," I told him and I noticed his brow starting to crinkle. "Powell?" he said, "never heard of it." "Yes, Powell," I repeated and then spelled it for him and named some of the places close to us he may have heard like, "Columbus, Ohio State, and Polaris Mall." We're in Powell but that's only part of the story. We are God's people because of a power, not a place. So, let's not give up on our reading today because of strange sounding places. God's Holy Spirit is moving. God is leading in our lives. God is shaping us and guiding us, and the task is to sense what the Spirit is doing and where the Spirit wants us to go.

As I've said, the message is clear. The Holy Spirit is moving. What's not as simple is how to discern the movement of the Spirit and what it means for us. The Apostle Paul experienced that struggle. What nearly closed Paul off from what God was doing was his certainty. He had a plan. He had an agenda and an itinerary. Paul knew the way he wanted to go and he nearly missed the path God opened up for him. Let me tell you how it happened. We know that through his missionary career Paul ventured out on several journeys. Our reading today focuses on his second missionary journey into the territory known as Asia Minor. Here's the thing. He'd been there before and that was the start of the problem. Paul planned to visit the communities where he had already established relationships. He knew the way. He was familiar with the roads. He felt comfortable picking up his work from where he left off and building upon it. Paul had already thought about his goal and was ready to implement his plan. The problem was God had another plan. Remember I said the bible wants us to hear more than just the names of strange sounding places. What's most important here is how God's plan changed Paul's plan. God's agenda and God's desire reshaped Paul's goal. This is why we're given all of the names of places. Paul had circled the places in the familiar territory. He wanted to go to the expected cities and follow the obvious path. God wanted Paul to go this way, entering a new land, meeting new people, experiencing the way the Holy Spirit was opening the hearts of all kinds of people who would be included in the community of Christ. Paul gets ready to turn this way and the bible says the Spirit prevented him. Paul set his sights over there and the bible says the very Spirit and presence of Jesus turned him to go the other way. Sometimes the Spirit says "Go," and sometimes the Spirit says, "No." I don't know about you but I don't think I'm as tuned in as I need to be to which of those the Spirit is saying in my life. For Paul, the new direction for his mission and the new thinking in his mind began with the vision God gave him to see a whole new world. I remember Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech when he saw the barriers of racial division broken down and all God's children living together. Paul's dream moved him to see beyond the relative

smallness of where he thought God was working to envision a wide and open and inclusive community of Christ. What new way, or new mission, or new way of thinking, is God making possible in us, pulling us away from what we are so clear about in order to move toward a wider and more expansive vision of faith?

Let me tell you about Henry. Henry is the new dog of one of our adult children. This weekend our 2 sons and daughter, are taking advantage of the holiday weekend by way of a little road trip together. To help that happen we, the parents, are assisting. Kelly and I are caring for our 2-year old granddaughter while they are gone, which is wonderful. Any opportunity to spend time with our little one is great. But this brings me back to Henry. Kelly and I were clear about our plan to care for our granddaughter. No problem there, until our son, Kevin, couldn't find secure arrangements for Henry. Well, just to cut to the chase, Henry is also with us for the weekend. This wasn't my plan but plans change. I'm not as enthusiastic to spend time with Henry as I am our granddaughter but that's OK. I've had to wrap my mind around a different agenda. The weekend has taken another path. At first, I felt some frustration with all of this but then I realized that what opened me to a new plan had more to do with my heart than my mind. Henry's with us not just because I like dogs but because of our love for our kids and the fact that we love they want to spend together. The plan changed because in the Spirit of family sometimes you just do what needs to be done. It's not the path I saw for our weekend but it's the road we're on, and it's all good.

Paul's plan was set but all of that changed when God worked in his heart to open him to a new direction. That movement of the Holy Spirit carried Paul and the message of Jesus into a new territory. At the end of the story we've read Paul meets up with a woman named, Lydia. I don't think Paul would have ever thought in his wildest dreams that one day he would be sharing faith with a woman like her. Yet, God had another plan in mind. There he was, sharing the message of Jesus with her because God had opened the way for Paul and God had opened her heart to listen to the salvation story.

The work of opening the way and opening our hearts continues because the Spirit is still moving. Church, if we think we know everything we need to know and we're good, God has another plan. If we like where we are and would just as soon stay put, God has another plan. If we are absolutely certain what God is doing and how far God will reach, God has another plan. And like with the Apostle Paul, the good news is how God is opening up hearts so that we will have a share in that mission.