

On the Edge
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May 9, 2010

Acts 16: 9-15
Revelation 21: 22- 23:5

The stories from Acts the past number of weeks have been all about vision: Saul loses his vision; Peter has a vision of the unclean becoming clean. Today Paul is beckoned to Macedonia in a vision. The lectionary didn't give us the healings, getting thrown in jail, conflict among the believers, but it is all there. Luke, the writer of Acts, lets us know that it was an interesting time to be part of this developing faith tradition.

Today, for Mother's Day, the lectionary gives us a text where a woman figures prominently. How handy. So who was Lydia and what is she doing here?

Let's build the context. This vision to go to Macedonia comes to Paul after the Jerusalem conference where there is a big discussion and decision about what to do with Gentile believers. How do Gentiles fit into this Jewish renewal movement? After it is decided that Gentiles do have a place at the table, Paul wants to return and *visit the believers in every city where they had proclaimed the word of the Lord and to see how they are doing.*

Barnabas is eager to take John Mark along, but Paul says John Mark has not been trustworthy enough. Paul and Barnabas had worked together for some time but now they split — Barnabas travels with John Mark and Paul travels with Silas. Paul tries to find the next place to preach the gospel. ⁶*They went **through** the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to*

speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.

So here they are in Troas, trying to figure out where to go next to preach the word and Paul has this vision: a man in Macedonia is beckoning to him, telling him to come there and help them. This is Paul's call to Europe, a whole new territory for the gospel message.

Immediately Paul and his companions set out for Macedonia. This is no small matter; they have to get on a boat and sail 50 miles to the island of Samothrace. They then sail another 50 miles and dock at Neapolis. From there they find a way to Philippi, about 15 miles inland. Philippi is described as the leading city in Macedonia; it is the center of Roman rule where the action is.

Paul and company stay in Philippi for a few days, perhaps searching for the man from the vision. As they gather information, meeting people here and there, they get word about a gathering of believers outside the city gate near the river. On the Sabbath they go visit this gathering place, this place of prayer. They don't find a local Macedonian man, but a group of women led by a foreigner. As a rabbi in the Jewish tradition, Paul sits right down (in the teaching posture) to teach the women gathered.

While this scene may seem fairly matter of fact, I wonder if we are receiving important clues about this fledgling movement moving from Judaism to Christianity. Paul sits down to teach, as Jewish rabbis did, but he is teaching women. It doesn't sound like there is a minyan here. Public prayer and worship in

the Jewish tradition must have a minyan, 10 adult men. These women likely would not have met the criterion. There don't seem to be any men in the group except when Paul and his traveling companions arrive. Women probably gathered by the river to do laundry, but on this Sabbath they are gathered to pray.

As the only woman called by name in the passage, Lydia is likely the leader of this gathering. She is from Thyatira, in Asia. She is a foreigner in Philippi; she and her household are several hundred miles from home. We are told Lydia deals in purple cloth; she is a businesswoman. As purple was a color worn by the wealthy and royalty, she must sell to the rich and powerful. She must be used to dealing with powerful people.

But here she is, at the rivers edge, a “worshiper of God” and an attentive listener with the other women. After listening carefully to Paul, taking in his message, she and her whole household are baptized, probably right there in the river. Lydia must be influential, if not forceful. She practically demands that Paul come and stay with her and her household.

Was Paul shocked when he found that the gathering at the river outside the city gate was women? Was he surprised that the leader of the group was not a Macedonian man, but Lydia from Thyatira across the sea? His vision led him to Macedonia, but what he found there was not exactly what he had imagined. He ends up not in the center of the city speaking to the powerful but on the edge of town by the river, teaching Gentile women.

Here at Hyattsville Mennonite, we often imagine we are on the edge. Sometimes people I don't know find out I am a Mennonite minister and they seem baffled. I explain that we are not stereotypical Mennonites, though we are committed to most traditional Mennonite beliefs in our own ways. Sometimes we feel as if we are barely hanging onto the edge of the larger church by our fingernails. But I also explain that I am happy on the edge (when I am standing up, not hanging by my nails). The edge is where the Spirit is at work, where we have more freedom to see the Spirit at work.

Are we really on the edge? We have a church building and two pastors. We are established, fairly conventional. While we may be on the edge theologically, there are lots of other ways that we are just a little left of center.

I met Mark van Steenwyk several years ago. It took me a while to understand what he is about. He is not loud and he certainly doesn't boast. But he is a man of vision who lives and works on the edge. Mark is a leader in the Missio Dei community, an intentional "new monastic" community on the West Bank of Minneapolis. Their website describes the area this way – *The West Bank of Minneapolis (aka "Cedar Riverside") is a diverse neighborhood of immigrants, refugees, punks, artists, homeless people, students, activists and professionals all within about one square mile. More than 2/3 of the neighborhood is low-income or below the poverty level.*

Missio Dei chose to go to the West Bank, where there were no churches, and see what God was doing, to see where and how they might be part of what God is doing. They moved into the neighborhood and observed for one year.

They did not try to start a church, they did not try to start a new ministry to the community, they just observed. (Paul did the same in Philippi except that his observation was only a few days, not years, before he was led to the edge of town.)

Missio Dei is committed to peace, prayer, simplicity and hospitality. They are finding ways to be church in this diverse neighborhood, to be in relationship with their neighbors. They pray together daily and eat together several times a week. Part of their life together is their Saturday Hospitality Train. Mark says: *We load up bike trailers and bring fresh ingredients and high quality portable cooking equipment to feed people good food. Along with food preparers/servers, we are sometimes joined by musicians who play as we serve food. A variety of people from all over the neighborhood come to our weekly feeding for good food and friendly conversation.*

When you are an established, more institutional church there are certain expectations about ways to “do ministry.” One of the gifts of living and worshipping on the edge is the freedom to follow the possibilities. This may not always feel like a gift, as sometimes freedom leads to pretty big risks. Like the time at Missio Dei when, as part of their ministry of hospitality, they invited a homeless man very much in recovery from alcoholism, to stay in the community house. And he got very violent. This scared everyone, but especially the family with a 1-year-old child. This pushed the group to understand boundaries in a new way and make some different decisions. The family with the young child moved

to a different house, still worshipping and relating to the community, but no longer living with the group.

In his first trip to Europe, Paul may have felt the risks acutely. He follows his vision to Macedonia and finds this group of women in Philippi. Should he acknowledge them as a faithful community even though there are no men, or at least not a minyan. And then the new convert Lydia presses him to stay with her in her home, using her recent baptism as a prod. They are now as brother and sister in Christ. Does he not trust her? But isn't it slightly scandalous for him to stay with her, him a single man, her a single woman? And then something else unheard of, should he leave the church at Philippi in the spiritual care of Lydia, a woman?

It is one thing to offer up this model of observation and then action. It is quite another thing to be part of the experiment. Leaders from a number of DC-area Mennonite-affiliated churches meet quarterly to support and help shape the work of Mennonite Central Committee locally. In the past several years, MCC has been trying this model on us: observation, listening and waiting.

At first I was unsure, I wanted the local program coordinator to tell us what he was going to do, what he thought needed to be done. I thought that we were called in as leaders to advise him in his work. But he had turned the tables and was asking what we wanted to do. We were asked, "To what work is God calling MCC and the local Mennonite congregations?" My uncertainty of the model turned to inner resistance. I didn't want this model used on me; I wanted to be the one administering it.

Now after several years, I see the merits though it is not easy. What we finally observed together is that there are many Mennonite-related groups in the metro area but we don't work together, don't even know each other. We are trying to work at that.

It is slow going; attendance at our quarterly gatherings is small compared to what it could be since there are over 20 Mennonite groups listed on the brochure. But some of us are getting to know each other, beginning to imagine that maybe we could work together across theological and cultural differences. Paul and Lydia's work may have been pretty slow too, but we only get the abbreviated version in Acts.

Mennonite Church USA encourages congregations to listen for where the Spirit is at work, to go the edges, to be "missional." The institutional church calls us to see where God is at work and to join in. Missio Dei in Minneapolis is a model and a member congregation of Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

But being part of the institutional church and missional at the same time is not so easy. In some ways the goals of institutional preservation and missional expansion are at odds. Rules might be broken: we might worship without a minyan; an unmarried male missionary might stay in the home of a single woman convert; leadership might be found in a person that has hitherto been deemed unsuitable for spiritual guidance. Mistakes might be made; lives may be endangered, children exposed to violence. While the center of the church tends to idealize — maybe even romanticize — faith on the edges, it is not without its hardships and risks.

On the other hand, we have not only Paul's vision but also John's vision in Revelation — there is no temple in the city, for its temple is God. What was once essential — the temple, the institution — is no longer needed. God is the temple; the presence of God is all around us and will light our way.

May we have the courage to listen and observe, step to the edge, sit with Lydia at the river and open our eyes to the work of God all around us.