

Acts 16:9-15 Pastor Bill Uetricht 6 Easter 5/26/19

I am one of those persons who grew up in the church, as did my wife Bev. Attending worship wasn't something we thought about; it was just what we did every week. Sometimes when you are so entrenched in something you don't step outside of that something and think about what it means. But when you become a pastor or are nominated for the office of bishop you are forced to think about it. What does it mean to be the church? More than just something I do every week, what is at the heart and soul of being the church? I think the Book of Acts provides us an entrée into that kind of conversation.

Interestingly, though, Acts doesn't start with a *massive* vision, a *huge* vision of a *huge* institution with well-developed rites and practices and a *large* cadre of leaders who have fancy uniforms and hats. Acts vision is quite simple. It takes us to the edge of town, outside the gate, to a place of prayer. Evidently, there is no synagogue yet in Philippi. A synagogue is where Paul would normally go. But there must not be enough people yet for a synagogue to be developed in Philippi. The small community is meeting outside, along the river, a venue they defined as a "place of prayer."

Paul meets with a group of women there. Again, we see how significant women were for the early church. This was not an all men's club. One of the women, Lydia, a business woman, a seller of purple cloth, finds herself especially attentive to what Paul is talking about. Lydia is said to be a "worshiper of God," which means she is a Gentile convert to Judaism. This convert listens eagerly to Paul, who has a new take on Judaism. His Judaism is a reformed one—one focused on Jesus. Lydia is so taken by the message that she wants to participate fully in it. She gets dunked. She and her family get baptized. The story of the dying and rising Jesus becomes her story.

Now I find it quite fascinating what happens right after her baptism. Lydia expresses a desire to get to know Paul better. She wants to build the relationship that she has begun with him. She wants

him to *enter her house*, to stay with her. Baptism leads to hospitality on her part, to the deep knowing that can occur only when we spend time with each other, only when we eat with one another. The church, long before it was an institution, long before it became a building, long before it developed a hierarchy, rites and rituals, was a fellowship.

Now don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with institutions, buildings, rituals, and protocols. They are the means by which we make sure the fellowship happens. Without them, often it often doesn't occur. But the heart of what it means to be the church is not discovered in all the trappings of church life, but rather in the fellowship that the experience of dying and rising with Jesus takes us to.

And I suspect that we in today's church in this culture need to grasp this if we are going to go into the future with faithfulness and with an ability to reach the people of our current era. Even though we are living at a time when people have more opportunities than ever to be connected to one another, we are amazingly lonely. Many people, and quite a few of them are young, are searching, sometimes even when they don't know it, for authentic community. For many of them, the trappings of our life together get in their way. It's why one community of faith in this community uses the slogan "relationships, not religion."

Now I have to say I don't think religion is all bad. In fact, for me it is part of the way we connect to the big things of life. Our rituals, our rites, our well-trained clergy often take us to the deeper places. And our institutions enable us to do so much together that we cannot do individually. But still, we've got to grasp that is what is at the heart of the search of so many people today is not institutional prowess, but authentic community, deep fellowship.

Note what the author of this portion of Acts, who is likely someone who has written a journal about this missionary journey, says about Lydia's invitation to Paul and his band of disciples. "And she

*prevailed* upon us!” Eugene Petersen translates this portion of the text as, “She wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

Fellowship for her entailed the privilege of prevailing upon Paul, the boldness of insisting that he and the other followers of Jesus enter into a deeper relationship with her. I sense that many folks these days are longing and searching for relationships they can prevail upon. They are taught all the time that they should make it on their own, rely on their own resources, but they know better. Why do you think they spend so much time on social media? They are looking for something, looking for relationships they can prevail up. The church is a fellowship that we can prevail upon.

Some of us are grieving, some of us are scared, some of us are facing horrible health struggles, some of us are drowning ourselves with alcohol and numbing ourselves with opioids, some of us have no idea what we are looking for, some of us are busy climbing ladders that we discover often are leading to nowhere, some of us are preoccupied with our own power, achievement, and success and still feel somewhat hollow. We who are the “some of us” can prevail upon the fellowship that is our gift, a fellowship that can nudge us, nurture us, comfort us, confront us, change us. We can refuse to take “no” as an answer as we seek to discover people who will authentically and vulnerably journey with us into the future that is so uncertain, a journey that we often don’t do very well.

The church at its heart is a fellowship. And the early church, as the story about Lydia demonstrates, focused that fellowship in the home. We are now living in a time when homes have become less and less the centers of our hospitality. I think that’s in part because we are all so busy and because media makes us think that our homes are supposed to be experiences of aesthetic perfection. For many of us, our homes simply bear witness to what we haven’t done or what we should do. That’s too bad. That prevents us sometimes from entering into the deep connections that can occur when we are in each other’s homes.

There is a growing amount of talk these days about the significance of doing church in our homes, or at least in other environments than our church buildings. The megachurches get people in small groups in people's homes. We here at First are messing with the possibility of doing some of our confirmation work around a dinner in the homes of our confirmation parents. For a while now, we have had "the breaking bread with friends" groups that often meet in people's homes. By the way, we are going to start up a new series of these meetings in the fall. Many people have discovered in these groups the joy that comes as we gather together around food and often in the homes of one another. If you are not aware, you should know that some churches these days are now experimenting with what is called "Dinner Church," which links the breaking of the bread of communion with the breaking of bread of an ordinary meal.

The church at its heart is a fellowship that enables people to rub elbows with real people who live with real concerns in real homes. But I would be remiss if my vision of the church stopped with that insight. I would also be neglecting the great vision of the church that comes from the Book of Revelation today. That vision isn't necessarily of the church, but of the final future. It's a picture of *the End* that is intended to tell us what in the end really matters and to give hope for the church of the present. The picture is of a city that is coming to earth from heaven. And in this city there is no temple. Wow, that is wild for a group of people for whom the temple was so important! There's no sun or moon, for the glory of God is the city's light. And the lamb, that is, the crucified Jesus, is the city's lamp.

And note who is coming into this city! The nations! Even the kings of the nations who thought they were in control are bringing their glory into this city. The church is not simply a local gathering. It is a world-wide community. It includes not just our kind or our nation, something we need to comprehend even and especially on a weekend when we often think about our own national identity. The church is not American. The church comes from all the nations of the world, defining

itself not by national identity. It is defined by the God who is God over all, the lamb, the crucified Jesus, who is Lord of all.

Pay attention to what the vision of John tells us about the city that represents the final future: "Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no light." If there is no light, the gates will never be shut. This is no gated community. This is no fellowship to which only the select are invited. This is a world-wide fellowship to which all are welcome.

Now it's true that not everything is welcome in this city. Revelation says that "nothing unclean" will enter the city. For the author of Revelation, the most unclean thing, the greatest abomination, is the cult of the emperor, the worship of the Roman leader who takes himself entirely too seriously. That's not welcome.

All are welcome. But some things and some behaviors are not welcome. Abusing our kids is not welcome. Tearing other people down with words or deeds is not welcome. The church is a community of welcome to all, but not to all behaviors.

The Gospel of John tells us today that those who live in love with Jesus will experience God and him taking up home in their midst. You see, the church is the community where Jesus and God take up residence, where love prevails. More than anything, the church is meant to be a community, local and worldwide, where God lives, where love reigns. And if the God of love lives there, I wouldn't want to be any place else.