

Prayer and Hospitality

Just in case you're wondering Many churches around the world are reading from the second chapter of Acts and celebrating Pentecost today. Why aren't we? You may recall that we celebrated Pentecost early this year, on April 18. We began a series on the book of Acts last month and decided to read the stories in order, rather than circling back. This is the next to last Sunday in our series on Acts. We have a lot to cover today.

Prayer: *God, we thank you for your love. We thank you for listening to our prayers. We thank you for showing up in many places, from the edges of society to our own homes. Help us open our hearts and minds to hear what you want to say to us. We welcome your presence in our lives today and always. Amen.*

Lydia's story is told in Acts 16, but the bigger story begins in chapter 13. Last week we read that Paul was befriended by Barnabas who vouched for him with the followers of Christ, the very people he had previously been trying to hunt down and arrest.¹ Paul then spends time in Arabia, Jerusalem, and Caesarea before returning to his hometown of Tarsus. It's in Tarsus that he connects with Barnabas again.

Barnabas is a Jewish Christian, a prominent leader of the early church in Jerusalem. He is one of the generous people who sold possessions and provided money for distribution to those in need. It is in a new role as an overseer of the church in Antioch of Syria that Barnabas seeks out Paul. This church is growing rapidly. The group is international and interracial in character.

The church in Jerusalem sends Barnabas to Antioch of Syria to investigate the new developments there. Barnabas is overjoyed to hear about Gentiles being converted and immediately begins to teach and encourage these new believers. He decides he could use the help of an enthusiastic convert, so he travels to Tarsus and persuades Paul to join him in ministry.

The church in Antioch soon begins to reach out beyond their own city. They decide to send Paul and Barnabas on a relief mission to Jerusalem to help the believers in Judea, who are suffering due to a world-wide famine. Later, after a concentrated season of prayer, they decide to send Paul and Barnabas out on a missionary journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor.

John Mark accompanies Paul and Barnabas on this journey. John Mark is a Jew from Jerusalem, a relative of Barnabas. He abandons the journey at Asia Minor – we aren't told why – leading to Paul's refusal to travel with him in the second missionary journey. Barnabas disagrees with Paul's decision. He wants to give John Mark a second chance, so he parts ways with Paul and takes John Mark with him on a journey to his home area of Cyprus. This time John Mark proves himself to be faithful.

Paul takes Silas and Timothy with him on his second missionary journey. Like Paul, Silas is a gifted leader and a fearless adventurer – an ideal traveling companion. Like Paul, Silas is a Roman citizen, a fact that proves useful for getting out of difficult situations.

Silas, along with Paul, Barnabas, and another man, is chosen to deliver an important letter to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. This letter contains the decision of a hotly debated

¹ The information about Acts 15-16 comes from the *Bible Insight* written by Jacob Elias and the teachers' notes written by Jamie May Smith in the Summer 2014 teacher's book of the *Gather 'Round* Curriculum published by MennoMedia, from BCBC on *Acts* written by Chalmer E. Faw, published by Herald Press, and from A. Wetherall Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Lesson 15, Series VII*, Bible Study Fellowship, 1996.

conference in Jerusalem concerning the issue of whether or not uncircumcised believers could be included in the community of faith. Remember, for the Jews circumcision was the most important symbol of their everlasting covenant with God.

After much debate, the church leaders arrive at a consensus that Gentiles who are turning to God are to be welcomed into the church without becoming Jews. There are a few guidelines to follow, but not the entire list of Jewish laws and without being circumcised. Silas helps to deliver this news to the Gentile Christians in Antioch and beyond.

Paul and Silas travel north from Antioch, west to Cilicia & Tarsus, through a mountain pass, then west to Derbe and Lystra. In Lystra they recruit Timothy. Timothy is the product of a mixed Jew-Gentile home. His mother, Eunice, and grandmother Lois have taught him the Scriptures. Now, all three are believers.

Paul is impressed that Timothy has qualities that would make him a good third member of the team. There is one serious difficulty, however. Timothy isn't circumcised. (Yes, the same topic debated again.) This could become an impediment in Jewish circles. However, to circumcise Timothy seemed to be a concession to the hardline Jewish Christians. It surely would be confusing to the Gentile churches who knew the results of the Jerusalem Council. What a dilemma. Since Timothy is a half-Jew by birth, Paul decides it best to circumcise him. This is not a requirement for salvation, but an equipping of someone for effective work among people of all backgrounds.

There are times you may choose to do something or choose not to do something out of consideration for the people you are with, so you are able to have a relationship with them. Maybe it's in how you dress, how you speak, what you eat or drink, where you go – may be even whether or not you wear a mask. I'm not suggesting you compromise who you are, but maybe let go of something in order to better relate to someone.

So now the team includes Paul, representing Antioch; Silas, representing Jerusalem; and Timothy, of Jew-Gentile descent from the newly evangelized churches. Their intended destination is likely Ephesus, but for some reason they head further north to Troas, a port city. Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, reports that the Holy Spirit is leading them. Is it through revelation, a vision, prophecy? Or is it through local circumstances or bad political relations? We don't know for sure, but it certainly must have involved prayer.

When they reach Troas Paul experiences a vision of a man from Macedonia, who pleads, "Come, help us." So it is that Paul and his party arrive in Philippi. The group now includes four men. Luke joins Paul, Silas, and Timothy as they set sail from Troas.

Philippi is a leading city of the district of Macedonia. The population consists of Thracians from the local area, Greeks brought in when it was further settled, and Romans who arrived when it became a colony. The local religion is a mixture of the worship of Thracian, Greek, and Roman gods and goddesses along with worship of the Roman emperor.

On the Sabbath, Paul and his group head outside the city to a river, which they believe is a likely place of prayer. There is no synagogue in the city, possibly because of anti-Jewish sentiment or because the Jewish population doesn't have the quorum of ten men needed for worship. However, this doesn't deter some devout women. They gather at the river to worship God, pray, and read Scripture. Paul joins them for worship and dialogue about the scriptures. He shares the gospel concerning Christ.

A few years ago, I traveled in Turkey, Greece, and Italy, stopping at many of the places mentioned in the book of Acts. In the modern-day city of Kavala, ancient city of Neapolis, is a mosaic depicting Paul's vision. Near the archeological site of the ancient city of Philippi is the Baptistry of St Lydia. Inside the building is a floor mosaic depicting part of Paul's journey. The building is built by a river, possibly at the site where Paul and his companions found the worshipping women.

One of these women is Lydia. She is a worshiper of God, undoubtedly a Gentile. As an unmarried woman, she can't convert to Judaism because she isn't associated with a circumcised male, either her father or husband. Lydia worships Israel's God but doesn't observe Jewish rituals.

Lydia came from the city of Thyatira, known for its textile industry. She established herself as an independent businesswoman with a market focus on purple cloth. Purple dye came from mollusks that lived deep in the Mediterranean Sea. Because it took thousands of these mollusks to dye one piece of clothing, the cloth was very expensive. Lydia must have acquired substantial wealth. As a single woman successfully making her way in a male-dominated business climate, Lydia is obviously a gifted and enterprising woman.

When she hears Paul expounding the gospel, she responds by requesting baptism. After her baptism she uses her gifts for ministry. She extends hospitality to Paul and his companions. She opens her home to other seekers and believers. When Lydia opens her home, what likely begins to form is a house church—one of the earliest forms of organized Christian community.

Women like Lydia who had the means to host house churches were crucial to the spread of Christianity. Households of faith, like the one that met in Lydia's home, were instrumental in moving the church to become a community where all people, whether male or female, slaves or free, Jews or Greeks are welcomed and adopted by God.

Two words that come to mind as I read Lydia's story are prayer and hospitality. Lydia and her companions didn't have a building in which to meet. They didn't have someone who was qualified to teach the scriptures. And yet, they met to worship and to pray. Paul and his companions met Lydia and her group as they searched for a place to worship and to pray. These acts of faith drew these strangers together.

After her baptism, Lydia welcomed Paul and his companions into her home. Her hospitality to these strangers might have tarnished her reputation and damaged her standing in the community, especially when Paul and Silas are arrested, attacked by the crowd, and beaten. They are accused of disturbing the city and promoting customs that violate Roman standards of conduct. When they are released from jail, Lydia welcomes them into her home again.

I've been spending a lot of time thinking about how we as a congregation can follow Lydia's example and extend welcome and hospitality to each other and to other people. Last Sunday I suggested that we write a welcoming statement, putting into words what our practice has been. I encourage you to look over the sample statements I presented last week and think about what our welcome statement should say.

Today I invite you think about how we can practice hospitality as we make some changes to the way we worship together. For the past fourteen months, most of us have joined worship via Zoom, while some of us have gathered in the sanctuary. Beginning June 6, those numbers will change. More of us will be in the sanctuary while fewer of us will be on Zoom. We will return to a more "normal" kind of worship. However, not everything will revert to the way it was fourteen months ago. While some decisions have been made, others have not. What I'm about to say about worship may change after the church board meeting next week.

We plan to have a greeter at the door again. However, we won't be handing out bulletins to every person. I plan to combine the bulletin and order of worship into one document and will continue to distribute it on Saturday via email. A few paper copies will be available for visitors. Let me know ahead of time if you want me to print one for you as well.

The greeter will invite visitors to sign the guest book if they want to and will introduce guests during the announcement time if it's OK with them to do so. We don't want to put anyone on the spot without their permission ahead of time.

While mask mandates and distancing guidelines have been dropped in most places for vaccinated people, we will continue to encourage mask wearing and as much distancing as is possible. Almost everyone who will be in the building for worship is fully vaccinated, but there are no plans to ask people about their vaccination status. Wearing a mask can be an act of hospitality for someone who is feeling vulnerable. Recognizing that someone cannot wear a mask for an entire service can also be a loving act.

At the memorial service yesterday, I heard people asking each other, “Is it OK if I hug you?” This is a caring and hospitable question to ask, even after the age of COVID. For some people, a touch or a hug is an uncomfortable and even trauma-producing action. We do well to always ask before offering a hug to someone.

The order of our worship will remain the same, but there will be some changes in the music. The prelude and postlude will be played live rather than pre-recorded. Some of the hymns will also have live accompaniment. We’ll continue to sing along with recorded music for some of the other hymns, especially as we learn new songs in the *Voices Together* hymnal. The use of live music means that the quality of sound will decrease for those joining by Zoom. We value the interaction possible on the Zoom platform, but it’s not a very good way to transmit live music.

Best advice about singing in-person continues to change. Singing, especially singing with gusto, is one of the most effective ways to spread droplets that can linger in the air and infect someone else. Some congregations are choosing not to sing in-person or are singing only at the end of the service. We have decided to sing throughout the service as we have been doing. Wearing a mask while singing will not completely stop droplet spread, but it will hinder it.

We will not pass offering plates or shake hands and greet each other during the service. We will continue asking people to come to the pulpit for sharing. We will continue to pray the Lord’s Prayer together at the end of the congregational prayer.

As you can see, our guidelines for worship are much less strict than ones in some other congregations. The church board, worship committee, and I welcome your questions and suggestions.

I appreciate the words of Amy Gingerich, executive director of MennoMedia in an article she wrote about singing in church, “Politely bow out if you aren’t comfortable with the guidelines in your church. Respect your church’s restrictions even if you wish there weren’t any. These are hard decisions, so show kindness and compassion to those making decisions for your church.”²

Keep the stories from Acts and the words from 1 John in mind as you anticipate the changes to come. Pray, practice hospitality, and extend love to everyone. *We have experienced and we have entrusted our lives to the love of God in us. God is love. Anyone who lives faithfully in love also lives faithfully in God, and God lives in [them].*³

² <https://anabaptistworld.org/to-sing-or-not-to-sing/>

³ 1 John 4:16, *The Voice*