



THE
PLYMOUTH
PULPIT

“OPENING THE DOORS”

ACTS 16:9-15

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MAY 26, 2019

THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

During the night Paul had a vision. There stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

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. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us. She was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."

And she prevailed upon us.

- Acts 16:9-15

We were worshipping with a lively inner city Methodist congregation. The service was energetic. The music was exuberant. The preaching was more enthusiastic than what you usually hear.

Everything was wonderful—except for one peculiar detail. The forests, rivers, and mountains pictured on the huge screens at the front of the sanctuary looked nothing like the busy street we could see through the windows. Churches make a mistake when they act like God is more present in the woods than in the city. Sunsets are beautiful, but so are God’s people.

God has a special place in God’s heart for cities, because cities are where most of God’s children live. The Bible begins in a garden, but ends in a city. Jesus tells us to live as a “city on a hill.” Jerusalem, the Holy City, is the shadow of the great city to come.

New York has eight million people who have—sort of—chosen to live together. God who loves cities must love ours the most. God offers blessings for those who live here and pay attention.

Nora Ephron writes, “I look out the window and I see the lights and the skyline and the people on the street rushing around looking for action, love, and the world’s greatest chocolate chip cookie, and my heart does a little dance.”

God’s heart does a little dance for New York. We should do a little dance because we get to live in this city God loves.

New York has 257 skyscrapers. When you look up at trees in a forest you marvel at what God can do. When you look up at the Chrysler Building you marvel at what God and people can do together. God blesses us with a sense of wonder.

New York has 41 Broadway theaters, the greatest dramas and musicals in the world—*Hamilton*, *Lion King*, and *Wicked*. God blesses us with stories of hope, joy, and love.

New York has 83 museums—the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art, but also The Museum of the American Gangster, The Museum of Sex, and the Elevator Historical Society.

God blesses us with curiosity.

New York has over 2,000 bridges. According to one questionable estimate, 125,000 cars, 4000 pedestrians—seems like more—and 2000 bicycles cross the Brooklyn Bridge each day. God blesses us with connections and bridges to one another.

New York has 31,982 restaurants—pizza in the West Village, chow Mein in Chinatown, pretzels on the street corner, and a smoke burger at Shake Shack. Enough restaurants for a different meal every meal forever. God blesses us with adventurous taste buds.

New York is a city of immigrants. 12 million people from all over the world came through Ellis Island—Puerto Ricans, West Indians, Italians, Chinese, Irish, Germans, and Russians. 37 percent of the residents of New York were born in another country. God blesses us with the heart of a city dweller, learning to welcome the variety of people that surround us.

We have no record of St. Paul ever walking through the woods looking for God. We have lots of

stories of Paul traveling from city to city, meeting an amazing variety of people and listening to what they think about God. Paul spends his life with strangers he has just met, in cities where he has just arrived.

In this story in Acts 16, Paul plans to check on some churches that seem about to close the doors for good, but the Spirit has other plans for the trip. Paul has a vision in which a person pleads with him to come to Europe—which was not on the itinerary.

When they get to Philippi they go to a women's prayer meeting down by the river. Lydia is a Gentile who is considering converting to Judaism. She is a rich businesswoman who deals in purple cloth. Purple was the old black.

She listens to Paul and the Spirit tells her it is true. Lydia is a strong woman. She tells her family that since they are now a Christian home they are going to be baptized. When God opens her heart she understands that being a Christian is about welcoming others and so she invites Paul to come home with her.

Paul is thrown by this invitation. For one thing, Lydia is a woman.

Jewish men are not supposed to speak to women in public. For another she is a Gentile. Jews and Gentiles do not sleep in the same house.

Paul decides to ignore the rules, because if they are going to be Christians they have to start acting like Christ.

We need to see how surprising this story is. Instead of Philippi imagine it is Brooklyn. Instead of 50 AD, make it 1950. A mother's group is watching their children play in Brooklyn Bridge Park—whatever park there was in 1950.

A preacher from the Middle East walks up and asks if he can tell them about his faith. Surprisingly, they say, "Sure." So he tells them the story of Jesus. And even more surprisingly a wealthy woman hears the story and believes. She invites the foreigner back to her place. It is scandalous.

Some Christians never understand what Lydia gets the first day she is a Christian—even though scripture says it again and again.

Sarah and Abraham welcome strangers passing through, inviting them to stay. One of the strangers turns out to be God. Later in Genesis, God's judgment comes down on Sodom and Gomorrah—not as some say because of sex—but because of a failure of hospitality. The Hebrew Scriptures insist that strangers, foreigners, and immigrants be given remarkable care.

The New Testament begins with a story of failed hospitality. When Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem they find no room at the inn. Welcoming others is at the heart of the Christian faith, because, as Hebrews puts it, "In welcoming the stranger, you may entertain angels unawares."

In the early monastic tradition the brothers and sisters gave hospitality to everyone who visited their

community, because you never know when Christ might appear in disguise. God comes in the stranger.

That truth makes us uncomfortable, because it is more difficult to be a friend to someone who is different. We keep our distance from those we do not care for. We have careful conversations and do not share who we are. We do not completely trust those who are not enough like us.

Before we moved to Brooklyn, I had the perfect barber shop—red and white barber pole, fifteen dollar haircuts, fifteen-year-old copies of Field and Stream, and country music on the radio—the kind of barbershop where there are only men. Five chairs, three barbers—

all of them my father's age. Guys with less hair than a peach hung around all day.

Jerry was an excellent barber. He knew that a haircut should be boring. Our only issue was that Jerry could not cut and talk at the same time. If I asked the wrong question, he might stop cutting for ten minutes.

Then one day I went for a haircut and a woman about twenty-five was seated in one of the empty chairs. It was like seeing Mike Pence at a Planned Parenthood fundraiser.

“So Jerry, you have a new barber?”

Jerry whispered, “She's the new owner.”

“Well, that's great.”

“We'll see.”

When I went to the barber shop six weeks later, Jerry was gone. The new owner was the only one there. *Field and Stream* had been replaced with *People*. I did not recognize the radio station.

“Can I get a haircut?”

“Do you see a line?”

“How much will it cost?”

“What was it before?”

“Fifteen dollars.”

“Then that’s what it is. How do you want it cut?”

“Six weeks shorter than it is now. My expectations aren’t high. I understand you’re not working with runway material.”

Alexia always wanted to run her own place. She had hoped the other barbers would stay, but they left to go to other shops.

I asked, “How’s business?”

She said, “When people come in and see that it’s my shop now they give me dirty looks and walk out. I don’t think old white men want their hair cut by a young Hispanic woman. The only customers I have are the ones who followed me from the old shop in my neighborhood.”

Alexia lives in a different part of town. She does piercing—which I cannot imagine Jerry doing. She put in flat screen TVs and set them on ESPN.

I ended up with Alexia as my barber. I did not know many people from her part of town. But I understand the people who go across town to stick

with their old barbers. Sometimes we want what we have gotten used to.

When you go to college and need a roommate, you fill out a form so you can be matched with someone who thinks and acts like you do. Online dating services are based on the assumption that everyone is looking for that special someone who is just like them. Churches work with the same idea, helping people find others like themselves—young republican churches, aging liberal churches, and good looking thirty something couples with two preschoolers churches.

Churches are simpler when everyone thinks the same way. Sometimes churches teach people how to be good church members and forget to teach them how to be like Jesus. Churches that want to be like Jesus have to keep asking: Are we going to welcome everyone God welcomes? Are we going to lock the doors or open the gates? Will the way we love others reflect the way God loves us?

Christians move toward situations that others avoid. When someone is different some look the other way, but Christians have a different response. We are magnetized toward such situations, not because it is easy for us, but because God's love compels us. The grace of God helps us recognize that we need to cross barriers.

Research on racial diversity within work environments discovered years ago that adding an African American to an all-white group increases the

group's creativity. This is true even if the minority does not say anything. Everybody gets smarter when there is diversity in the room.

When asked, "What would you change about Plymouth?" many of us have the same answer, "I wish we were more diverse." We need all kinds of people in the room, so that we will become better people. When a men's Bible study invites women to join them, the conversation gets more intelligent.

When a finance committee adds a novelist, they become a better finance committee. When a group of thirty somethings welcome a sixty-year-old, it is more fun. When rich people widen the circle to include poor people, straight people include gay people, youth include children, old members include new members, Congregationalists include people who do not know what that is, liberals include conservatives, business people include theater people, couples include singles, extroverts include introverts, when that happens, we become more like God's church.

When we baptize an adult at Plymouth we ask about their acceptance of God's forgiveness, commitment to follow Christ, and promise to be the church. Maybe we should ask, "When you see someone different from you, will you walk towards them? Will you ask their name? Will you listen to their story? Will you love others like God loves you?"

The more we look like the crowd on the G train, the more we look like Christ's church. In our neighborhoods, workplaces, and schools, there are people we need to become a better church. We need others to teach us how big the world is and how wide God's grace is.

Someone invites a young woman, new to Brooklyn, far from home—still confused by everything that is not like home—to come to Plymouth. She walks in the door at 57 Orange and is greeted by genuine people who offer genuine welcome. She sits by people in worship she would not get to talk to any place but in this sanctuary. During coffee hour, circles of friends are enlarged to include her in the conversation. God is in the extraordinary interactions at Plymouth.

Last Sunday in Hillis Hall, just before the annual meeting, Chris DeRosa asked, "What can I do for you? Is there something I can do for you?"

What a Christian thing to ask. We are learning to say sacred words like: "Come sit with us." "What brings you to Plymouth?" "Tell me about your family." "What's causing that smile on your face?" "What are you dealing with that's hard?"

We are not the church because of our similarities. We are the church because of God's grace. The more diversity we welcome into our congregation the more of God's love we reveal to one another and to the world. God invites us to live with hospitality, listening to those whose

experiences are different from our own, and learning to be God's people.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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