

“A Vision For Growth”

Liturgical Date: Easter 7 (C) [this text actually is for Easter 6]

Primary Text: Acts 16:9-15

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Seventh and final Sunday of Easter, is the First Lesson from Acts 16. We continue to see themes today that we have seen in our lessons lately. The Gospel is expanding, “all nations” (the Gentiles) are being included. And we have seen visions of Peter, the readings from Revelation are visions God gives to John, and then today we see it is St. Paul that has a vision. The title of the sermon tells us the result of that revelation given to him from God, “A Vision For Growth”.

When one thinks about Europe and religion, they think primarily of Christianity. In many parts of Europe religious devotion has diminished in recent decades, but it is still the primary faith of the continent. Just think of the stunning Cathedrals throughout Europe: Westminster Abbey, Notre Dame, Koln, Milan, St. Peter’s, and we could go on. Think of all of the famous artwork produced there that has religious themes: Michelangelo’s Last Judgment as well as his Creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rembrandt’s Prodigal Son, da Vinci’s Last Supper, Italian frescos, Greek iconography. Then the Great Christian leaders: Constantine, Charlemagne, Calvin, and of course, Luther. Even the founding of America was largely influenced by nations and groups wanting to spread their particular “brand” of Christianity. Europe has been a continent that has been associated with the Christian faith for almost 2,000 years. But of course, there was a time when Christianity was not prominent in Europe at all. There was a

time when the number of Christians in Europe was 0. The beginning of how that changed is where our text and sermon takes us today.

Acts Chapter 16. Our assigned First Reading for today is verses 9-15 of this chapter. I think it is safe to say that Paul receiving the vision of the Macedonian Call and the conversion of Lydia is not at the top of most people's lists of favorite or well known-Bible stories. Arguably, it should be one that we think of more quickly, though. Like Peter's vision in Acts 10 (and recounted in Acts 11) it is very important, especially for those of us here in this building today. Without the vision given to Peter, our diets could look a lot different. And we learned that without the Gospel being brought to and the Holy Spirit falling on the Gentiles in Cornelius' home, we may not even be here because we are Gentiles. And this text is similarly important to us, because those of us here today are primarily of European heritage. Without the Gospel being brought to Europe, there could be fewer of us here today. Imagine how different history and the world would be without a Christian Europe?

What we hear in the inspired Scripture today is how that all began. Christianity enters Europe, the first converts are made, and as they say, "the rest is history." Let's back up for a moment and fill in some of the gaps between Acts 11 (where our last First Reading was from last week) and Chapter 16, verse 9. The Gospel continues to go forth to Jew, and now Gentile. The Church continues to face opposition and persecution as James is martyred and Peter imprisoned, but the message goes forth. The Apostle Paul begins his four missionary journeys. The first major Church Council takes place in Jerusalem. The correct and vital decision is made that the Gentiles should be full and equal members of the Church and that they are not to be required to follow the Mosaic Law, including

not being circumcised. Paul then sets out on his Second Missionary Journey, joined by Silas, and later Timothy and Luke. Up to this point the, the Gospel had been spreading throughout the Middle East and some into Africa (Ethiopia). Much of the missionary work going north had been into what is today Syria and Turkey, which was then known as Asia Minor. But none to Europe.

That is going to change in Chapter 16. Before the assigned reading begins in verses 6-8, we see St. Paul and his missionary companions travel into Asia Minor from Antioch. Keep in mind that it was almost 1,000 miles from Antioch to Europe, and they were traveling on foot! But it is also important to note that St. Paul had no intention of going to Europe, believing that this missionary journey should center in Asia Minor (again, modern-day Turkey). God had other plans. These verses tell us that the Holy Spirit was forbidding them to preach in the areas that they went to or attempted to go to. This could have again been a vision, but also could be that God was what we commonly today call “closing doors” in that no opportunities to ministry were opening up. Paul, Silas, and Timothy must have been frustrated. “We are trying to spread the Gospel here, Lord”, perhaps they thought. They end up in Troas, which is on the Asian side of Aegean Sea.

This is where our assigned reading picks up. In the night, a vision comes to St. Paul. It is one that will change the trajectory of this missionary journey, the history of the world, and see countless souls saved. In this vision a man from Macedonia calls out to him earnestly (depicted on your bulletin cover). The words recorded in the Bible are brief, *“Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* (v9) How could Paul help them? He knows how. By preaching the Gospel to them (v10). What greater help could we be to someone than speaking to them the

words that bring forgiveness of sins and eternal life in Jesus Christ? The typical faithfulness to the call of God that we see Paul have is on display here. Any other plans are abandoned, *“immediately we sought to go to Macedonia”*. (v10) And that is what they did (note the “we” here is because the author of Acts, St. Luke, has now joined them).

Remember that the geopolitical borders of that time were much different than the modern nations of today. This area was all part of the huge Roman Empire and it was divided into provinces. Today, this region would be north-central Greece. So, this would definitely involve leaving Asia and crossing into Europe. They board a ship and sail to the island of Samothrace, which is a Greek island. They are now officially in Europe. From there they catch another ship and land at Neapolis (today Kavala). They are now on mainland Europe. From there they travel to the city of Philippi, in Macedonia.

You are hearing how God is orchestrating all of this. And He will continue to do so. In bringing the missionaries to Philippi, they have been placed in a very important and strategic city. Philippi was named for the Father of Alexander the Great, Philip II. It was actually a place that had a lot of retired Roman soldiers that lived there. It stood as an important transition point from Europe to Asia as the main highway between these two areas, the *Via Egnatia*, passed right through the city. It sat on the Gangites (today Angitis) River, which provided access to the sea. It was also a thoroughly Gentile city. There were so few Jewish people there that they did not even have a synagogue. This was strange to Paul and his companions, because even now that the Gospel was going forth to Gentiles, the pattern was that they would first go to the Jewish population. So, what are they to do?

The small band of Jews and Gentile proselytes (converts to Judaism) that inhabited the city would gather outside of the city gates at the riverside for prayer. On the Sabbath Day, our missionaries figure this is the place to go. It is also interesting to note that verse 13 says that they spoke to *“the women who had come together.”* Apparently, there were very few or no men that were attending this devotional gathering. It is here that they would meet a woman named Lydia. It is here that God would work. Once again, we see that women feature prominently in the New Testament and the Bible often writes about them as willing recipients of the Gospel and people of strong faith.

Who was this Lydia? She was not a native to Philippi, but from Thyatira- which is in Asia Minor. Thyatira was a wealthy city, largely because of the purple dye and textiles manufactured there. Remember that purple became known as the color of royalty because it was so expensive. That is what she does in Philippi, she sells purple fabrics. She would almost certainly be a fairly wealthy woman because of this, indicated later by we see that she has a large enough home to invite the 4 missionaries to stay in. She would have been known in the community. Again, God is putting everything together. A well-known and prosperous woman who had the facilities where the first Christians here could meet. We also read in verse 14 that Lydia was “worshiper of God”. This could also be translated as a “God-fearer”. We see these “God-fearers” a few times in the New Testament. These were Gentiles who believed in and worshipped the God of Israel, the one true God. To fully convert to Judaism, (as we have learned) males would need to be circumcised and both male and female would be expected to follow the Old Testament Laws. In short, Lydia was a Gentile who

was worshipping as a Jew. We are seeing God chose a person who could relate to both Jew and Gentile, bridging that divide.

And so they spoke to Lydia at the river about Jesus. And she believed. She was Baptized. She showed fruit of her faith in opening her home in hospitality to Paul and his missionary partners. I must also note that this text supports the good theological principles that we believe from the Bible. Notice who opened Lydia's heart that she may be believe and be saved, "*The Lord opened her heart*" (v14). It wasn't that Paul and his companions made such a great "sales pitch" or scholarly sounding speech that converted her. It wasn't even that she heard and "decided" to believe on her own reason or understanding. Conversion is the work of God the Holy Spirit and that is clear here. We also see that Baptism was administered, rather quickly as we often see in Acts. And it was not just a baptism for Lydia, but her whole household. This is one of several times that we read in Acts where children would have almost certainly been baptized. Baptism is not our work, but God's work.

Lydia. Perhaps one of the unsung heroes of the Bible. She opened her home, likely the early Christians met and gathered in her home as the "house church" in Philippi. And from here, God continued to work. The church planted in Philippi would become one of the strongest and most generous congregations of the New Testament times. St. Luke would pastor there for a time. And the Gospel didn't stop at the city limits of Philippi.

As we heard earlier, the Christian Church would grow and expand in Europe over the following centuries, until it becomes the dominant religion in this part of the world and then is spread to other areas from Europe. Specifically, in which modern nation this would take place, Greece, it is one of the most Christian

countries in the world with almost 99% of the population identifying as Christians. What an impact. The vision God gave to St. Paul was a vision of growth. It was a vision that would lead him to Greece, Macedonia, Philippi, and ultimately to “a seller of purple goods” named Lydia. God was directing this whole process. He has used Paul, Lydia, and so many others to spread the Gospel. And He desires to use you too! Maybe God will call you to be a missionary in a foreign land, He just might do that. However, more than likely He is calling you to be a missionary right here, right where He has you. Speak the message. Christ has died for our sins and risen in new life!

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!

Amen.