AMDG 7th Sunday of Easter – C Text: Acts 16: 9-15

 May 1st, 2016

**Acts 16: 9-15** 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 worshipper 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.

**Down By The Riverside**

**When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn’t go, and doesn’t suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals, and say we’ve no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I’m tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people’s gardens
And learn to spit.**

**You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in boxes.**

**But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.**

**But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.**

***“Warning!”****written by Jenny Joseph*

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Don’t you love it?! In our secret hearts of hearts – how many of us long to wear purple with a red had that doesn’t go – and pick flowers in other people’s gardens – and learn to spit? I think we all have that rebel in us – a desire to break free from the boundaries that others, and societal convention tell us we must do and be. Sometimes it is our own shyness and inhibition that hold us back, and sometimes a lack of self-esteem, or a desire to belong that have us following the crowd or the dictates of social norms and fads.

Unconventional people stick out – make a splash – and live their lives by a different beat. As Thoreau says in his poem: *“If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a* **different drummer***. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”* Sometimes it doesn’t have so much to do with being a rebel as it does following that different drummer - the leading and inner wisdom of our own hearts – or the guidance of the Spirit – as we see in both of our main characters in today’s scripture from Acts.

We first encounter Paul previously as the avenging angel of the Jewish people – ready to denounce and persecute any followers of the one called ‘Jesus’ – the one they are calling the Messiah and now, since his crucifixion – even the Risen Lord. And he is so zealous in this task that he makes it his life’s mission to ‘root out’ this blasphemy against God and the Jewish faith ….. Until he is abruptly brought to a halt by a blinding vision of this very Jesus – calling him to turn his life and zeal to leading the Christian way. Unconventional would be the operative word for this man – who allowed himself to follow the drumbeat of God leading him to examine, challenge and change his own and other’s expectations of what it meant to faithfully follow God. Now – several years later – we find Paul here – in Philippi – down by the riverside with a bunch of women – once again about to throw convention aside and challenge the status quo.

That wasn’t his original intent. **According to the story, when Paul and Silas arrive in Philippi to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ, they begin by looking for a synagogue. They figure a synagogue is a good place to begin because that’s where the folks who already believe in God hang out. But to have a synagogue you need ten men who will meet together to say prayers - the** *minyan* or quorum required for certain religious obligations. **Philippi, it seems, didn’t have ten men to form a synagogue. At that time however, in the event that there was no synagogue, any Jews or God Fearers that happen to be in the town or passing through know to meet down by the river on the Sabbath to pray. So, Paul and Silas head down to the riverside, hoping to find 10 men with whom to talk and pray and share the good news of Christ.**

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**But there – down by the river they find only women. And the scripture tells us that here - once again - Paul breaks all the rules of convention by “*sitting down and speaking to the women who had gathered there.”*  When the Acts of the Apostles was written sometime near the end of the first century, (*most scholars date it between 80 to 100* AD) this sort of encounter would have been considered outrageous; women and men, especially strange men, simply didn’t have encounters in public. But by following the drumbeat of the Spirit’s leading rather than the norms of the day– Paul widened the circle of inclusion – and paved the way for God bring something new into being. For, down by the riverside, Paul meets the other unconventional person of note in this story – Lydia.**

**Right from the beginning of the story, Lydia is described in an unconventional way. We are told that she is “*a God fearer; a worshipper of God and a dealer in purple.*” God-fearers in that time** represented a group of gentiles or non-Jews who shared some religious ideas and practices with the Jews but were not full converts. Actual [conversion to Judaism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conversion_to_Judaism) would require adherence to all of the [Laws of Moses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_Mitzvot), including various prohibitions – like circumcision and food restrictions - which were generally unattractive to would-be gentile *(largely Greek)* converts. **The fact that she was able to make some choices and decisions in this respect indicates that she was either single or a widow, as most women in those days followed the dictates of their husbands.**

**And as for being a dealer in purple …. The colour purple in those days took thousands of tiny mollusks – a particular type of shellfish - just to produce enough dye to make a yard or two of purple cloth – making it very expensive to harvest and produce. The wearing of purple was a statement of status and wealth.** It could only be sold by special permission, by a royal decree. So when Luke tells us that Lydia is a seller of purple, he is letting us know that this is not just an average trader; this is someone who is rich, someone who is prestigious and a woman to boot!

Down by the riverside that day, we are told that, *“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”* Following that, we are told that Lydia and her household were baptized and that she opened her home to Paul and Silas – inviting them to come and stay with her.

We're used to hearing in the Bible that powerful men made decisions for their households, but does it strike our ears differently when a woman does so? And how ironic is it that much of European Christianity has long prevented women from being leaders in the church, when the first European Christian was a Gentile woman!

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For many scholars agree that the church that was formed in Philippi - the church to whom Paul address his letter to the Philippians; this church, the first church in Europe - was in all likelihood founded and then led by the first European convert to Christianity; a woman named Lydia.

In these times of change and transition – perhaps we need to go down to the riverside once again – and listen to the stories of those who dared to follow the leading of the Spirit in new ways – to listen to the beat of a different drummer - in order to explore the new possibilities God is opening up for us as a church in *this* day and age. Like Paul and Lydia - perhaps we need to dare to step out of bounds once in a while, and take some risks. Perhaps we need to give ourselves permission to colour outside the lines! Perhaps we need to wear more purple in our lives!

And like the old woman in the poem with which we began – perhaps we shouldn’t wait too long – but start practicing right now for the new thing God is already creating in our midst.