

When God Leads Us Outside (Acts 16:6-15)

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The year before I was called to serve on staff here at First Baptist Church, I worked as a counselor for at-risk high school freshmen in the Jefferson City School District. I had a caseload of about 100 fifteen-and sixteen-year-old students. These students were identified in middle school by teachers and counselors as at-risk for not completing high school due to several factors. Factors like failing multiple classes, excessive absences, school suspensions and detentions, older siblings who had dropped out of school, and more. The goal was to help them overcome the challenges in their lives and beat the odds so they could finish high school.

While I had deep compassion and a calling for these specific students, their lives could not have been more different than my own. Even though we grew up in the same city, they're childhood and experiences were night-and-day from mine. We may have walked the same school hallways and city sidewalks years apart, but we walked in very different shoes.

I was full of love and an eagerness to help as their counselor. I was also full of ignorance. Ours were different worlds, different cultures, different challenges, different experiences. The only way I could begin to be the counselor these students needed and deserved was to be humble, curious, and open, praying the Spirit of God would give me wisdom along the journey the Spirit led me to outside what was familiar and known to me.

God sent me a teacher by the name of Homer. Homer was also employed by the school district and part of our work together was to go find the students on my caseload who had missed too much school and get them there. We were a bit of an odd couple. Homer was older. I was a baby in my early twenties. Homer had worked several careers. I was fresh out of college with a degree and a dream. Homer was black. I was white. Homer was a large, athletic guy. I was ... well, not a large, athletic guy. Homer understood more about the world of many of our students, and he became my teacher that year.

He was generous and patient with me. As I rode along in his truck through unfamiliar neighborhoods and sat in living rooms of buildings I'd never been in, I listened, and I learned. Homer created a safe place for me to ask questions and be curious. He didn't shame me for my ignorance. He'd often respond to my questions with a Jesus-type question – you know, questions that aren't an answer to your question and yet are the answer. I learned a tremendous amount that year from him and others that made me a better counselor and human.

My plan in and out of college was not to become a counselor to at-risk high school students. I studied to be a high school history teacher which I was for four years. But in working with

teenagers in the classroom, the Spirit of God led me outside my plans, my places, and my familiar people to join in what God was doing.

Have you ever had your next steps in life planned out only to run into detours or roadblocks? Have you ever found yourself in places and relationships outside your plans and preferences? Graduates, some of you are excited because your next steps are exactly what you hoped them to be. You're going to your first-choice school to study for the career you've always wanted. And some of you were led to a different place by scholarships or opportunities or by closed doors you still don't understand. And adults, when we look at these young graduates today full of hopes and dreams, we recall our own hopes and dreams as graduates years ago, some of us many years ago. Yet, we also have the perspective of years of twists and turns, opened and closed doors, hopes and disappointments.

I'm always fascinated when I see these photoshopped images of older actors with their younger selves. Like this one of Jennifer Anniston. Or this one of Tom Selleck. I imagine all the years and dreams and lessons between the two life stages captured in these photos and wonder what the older one would say to their younger self about life now that they've lived a few years.

What would you say to your younger self? What has surprised you about your life? Where has God surprised you? Because God often surprises us, working in the most unexpected people and places.

This is a major theme of the Book of Acts in the New Testament of the Bible. During the season of Eastertide this year, the seven Sundays beginning with Easter, we are walking together through the Acts of the Apostles. We are witnessing the fruit of the Resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in spreading the Gospel. In the Book of Acts, God's spirit moves as it chooses and pays no heed to established plans and patterns. God smashes barriers to God's dream as we read in the story of Cornelius last Sunday, and God erects barriers that divert from God's dream as we read today in the story of Paul's second missionary journey to proclaim Christ and establish churches.

Listen to v. 6 from our text today: "being forbidden by the Holy Spirit..." and v. 7. "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them."

Paul had a plan to go to Asia, yet the Spirit of God prevents them from going there. Paul runs into barrier after barrier to his plan on where to go next to proclaim Christ. Luke, the author, does not give us much more than this. What did God's prevention look like? When did they understand it to be the work of the Spirit versus just another travel headache or flight cancellation? Was it in the moment as they were living it, a deep sense of conviction, or did it come with hindsight as they reflected from the certainty of what God eventually did through those disruptions? Perhaps a little of both.

This experience with barriers was not the exception to Paul's journeys, but the rule. Our former pastor, Doyle Sager, once said that the missionary journeys of Paul looked like the tracks of a

drunken squirrel. I'll confess I've never seen the tracks of a drunken squirrel, or a drunken squirrel that I know of, but if I did, I bet Doyle was right. It would make no sense to us.

It wasn't just the tracks that looked crazy, but the destination as well. The story of the early church takes these first missionaries outside the circle of the known and the comfortable, the way things have always been done, who was in and who was out. The Spirit of God continually leads them outside – outside their plans, outside their places, outside their people.

The Spirit prevented them from their plans to go to Asia and instead gives Paul a new plan through a vision of a man pleading with them to come to Macedonia to help them. Paul shares the visions with his companions and the community agrees this is from God. They head to Europe, a brand-new place outside of where they had ever been and outside of where they had hoped to go.

They arrive in the city of Philippi and remain for some days, waiting on the next step from God. Praying, waiting, worshipping, seeking. Verse 13 tells us that “on the sabbath day they went outside the gate by the river.” They were looking for a place of prayer as they did each sabbath. Paul usually made the local synagogues his first stop in a new city, bringing the message of Jesus Christ to the established Jewish communities. Why he goes to the river outside the city, we do not know for certain. It is likely there was not a synagogue yet in Philippi. Maybe the city did not have the required ten Jewish men to form one. Regardless of the reason, Paul, who was committed to the practice and discipline of sabbath worship, went looking for a prayer meeting outside the norm of the synagogue. And in this frontier of sorts, they find a group of women, among them a woman named Lydia.

We don't know a lot about Lydia, but what we do is significant and surprising. Lydia is the head of her household, it appears. She is an independent, wealthy businesswoman. She is a worshipper of God. And although a man spoke to Paul in his vision to come to Macedonia, he encounters a woman instead. Before Paul became a follower of Jesus Christ, he had been a zealous Pharisee, upholder of the Law, and persecutor of the church. To a Pharisee there were strict laws separating men from women. Paul gathering with them shows Paul clearly has discarded these old laws because of his new life in Christ. Paul sits to address the women, which was how teachers taught in the ancient world, and a teacher of the law would not have addressed women this way. In including this story, Luke emphasizes his central theme in Acts of the expansion of the church into the whole world across and outside every possible barrier.

Paul tells Lydia about Jesus, and the Lord opens her heart to listen and respond. God's Spirit led Paul outside to Philippi, to the riverbank, and to Lydia. From beginning to end, Luke stresses that it is God who oversees the mission, God who sets its direction, and God who determines its results.ⁱ

Social and cultural barriers crumble as the first European convert to Christianity, a woman, experiences life-changing relationships with Christ and others. Lydia's transformation begins immediately. She is baptized along with her whole household, and she opens her home and life

to the mission of Christ. Her hospitality to Paul is evidence of her conversion and faithfulness to the Lord, and if Paul agrees, Lydia insists, then he and his companions must stay with her. And they did.

Philippi was outside Paul's proposed plan.
The riverbank was outside Paul's preferred place.
Lydia was outside Paul's predictable people.

Lydia and Paul's story might look like the tracks of a drunken squirrel, but they are the tracks of those who follow the Spirit over a script. Their story, powered by God's Spirit, resulted in the first Christian convert and first Christian church in Europe. From the time it was established, the church in Philippi thrived, becoming a generous partner in the spread of the gospel to other cities.

YOU AND ME:

Right now, life to you might look like the tracks of a drunken squirrel. But perhaps the Spirit of God is at work in tracks, leading us outside. Outside of our plans, our places, our preferences, and even our people, to join in God's redemptive work in our world, in another, and even in ourselves.

How can we prepare ourselves to be open to the Spirit's leading when God wants to lead us outside? Here are a few lessons from Paul and Lydia's story for us as individuals, as graduates, and as a church.

1. Be open to the Spirit. We used to have a cheesy saying at high school dances when couples were dancing too close together – leave room for the Holy Spirit. The same could be said for our lives. Leave room or create space for the Spirit. Don't get so close to your plans and your preferences that the Spirit can't be present. For Paul, his commitment to daily practices and rhythms of prayer and sabbath worship helped him stay open. Paul was able to be led outside by God through the daily rhythms that created space for the Spirit to speak and for Paul to respond. This is the gift of prayer, of studying Scripture, of gathering for worship, of service, of solitude. It was in Paul's obedience to sabbath worship that God led him to meet Lydia. Who knows what God has planned for you today by your presence in worship?

2. Be open to failure. Paul and his companions tried several things before getting an open-door to Macedonia. It was in their steps, even the missteps, that God was able to direct their paths. Sometimes we believe our missteps disqualify us. There is no where you can go and no choice you can make that is beyond God's reach and God's redemptive work. We are more likely to discover God's will by going and doing than by sitting and waiting. Don't be afraid to move and don't be afraid to fail. God works through both.

3. Be open to people. Without the work of the Spirit within both Paul and Lydia, it would have been difficult to bridge the cultural differences and build a relationship. As our world continues

to become more interconnected, we too must find ways to extend generosity and hospitality to others through looking past differences. Find a Homer who would allow you to ride along with them in life, ask ignorant questions without shame, and help you understand things and people outside your own experience. Be like Paul whose devotion to Christ led him outside the old laws to the new ways God was working through the marginalized and the outsiders of his time. What God did through Lydia, a woman, and a Gentile, was revolutionary for its time. What revolutionary thing is God up to now?

4. Be open to opportunities along the way. Remember this is a mission story. So are our lives. If we are looking for guidance only on questions of location or vocation, we may miss God's open doors. God has commanded all followers to make disciples. This doesn't mean we stop being accountants and athletes. It means that as we live out our callings, we must be alert to open doors for the Gospel. When God's leading doesn't make sense, when it takes us to strange places and persons, even when it results in suffering as it does for Paul, the Spirit invites us to look for the mission opportunities in our circumstances.ⁱⁱ

Where is the Spirit of God leading you and me outside our plans? Where is the Spirit of God leading this congregation outside our preferences? May we create space for the Spirit to lead us outside, so we might experience the joy and power of God's lifechanging work in others and in us.

ⁱ Peterson, Brian. Commentary on Acts 16:9-15. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/sixth-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-acts-169-15>

ⁱⁱ <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-05-20/acts-169-15-2/>