

050513 – Easter 6C – Communion Sunday

“Shall We Gather at the River?” © Rev Seth D. Jones

Rev. 21:10, 22:1-5; Acts 16:6-15

At first, Paul wanted to go to places he knew. He wanted to go to Bithynia, which is on the Western edge of modern day Turkey, but the Holy Spirit turned him away. He wanted to go to Asia, but the Spirit of Jesus stopped him. Both of these places would have held some passing familiarity to Paul, if only because Jerusalem was a central gateway for both areas. And they are accessible by easy trade routes over land.

But God had other plans for Paul and Timothy and Silas. Or rather, God invited them to an entirely new possibility. By way of a vision from a man from Macedonia, which was then confirmed by the community of faith, God called Paul outside of the boundaries of Jerusalem and all the way to Philippi, deep in Roman territory. Paul is invited to participate in God's great expansion of the promises of Jesus and Israel to the whole world. Paul goes, following the call of God.

In Philippi, he and Timothy and Silas gathered by the river where the Philippian women gathered to pray. And there, Paul was invited to share the Gospel with Lydia. Lydia is a fabric merchant and appears to specialize in purple dyes. This has made her wealthy and recognizable. She may or may not have been the head of her household, but she was definitely a business owner and someone who seemed to have breached the harsh and controlling rules that contained and reigned in the women of the time.

There are some important details to this story. Lydia was a believer in God, but there is no specification of what that means. I suspect she is very much like many people in America today, especially Maine. Most people claim a belief in some sort of Higher Power. Many will even call that Power God. But when pressed, their understandings and relationship to God is hazy and ill-formed, perhaps even immature. Lydia had some self-awareness, though, and invited Paul to share the Gospel with her.

Lydia was also wealthy. Purple dye in the ancient world was very expensive to produce, since it came from the ink of a particular snail in the Mediterranean Sea. The demand was high enough, however, that purple dye became extremely rare because, as we are wont to do whether it is the year 53AD or the year 2013AD, we can't get enough and will use up a precious resource because we have to have what it produces. In other words, the ancient world wanted purple so much they made the snail which produced purple dye extinct. The point here is that Lydia seems to know that all the wealth and standing in the world is never enough. Even the belief in God is not enough. Something is lacking. So she invited Paul to share the Gospel with her.

As Lydia and the other women went down by the river to pray, she learned about the good, old way, as the song says. She heard what Jesus had done and she saw the light of God shining out of Jerusalem for her. She opened herself to the new words, the new life, the new way which God invited her to through the words and willingness of Paul. Paul invited her to share in the family of God by being baptized. Lydia and her entire house are baptized and became the church at Philippi. And, because she now understood the openness of God to her and the world, she invited Paul and Timothy to stay at her house. She “*prevailed upon us*”, or “*urged us strongly*” the text says. These are the same words the two disciples of Emmaus use to invite Jesus into their house to share in the bread. “*They urged Jesus strongly to stay with them.*”

A strong invitation, an insistence that hospitality and gratitude be shown for what has been given – this is the theme that floats to the surface as we consider Paul's journey to Philippi. The invitation of God always calls us beyond where we thought we were going to go. More than likely, the choices *we* are making are still within the range of what we know. We might push the boundaries. Bythynia is on the western edge of Turkey and if you cross over you would be in Europe. And Asia, at least the Asia Paul was thinking of, was just across the desert with people he had seen before. But God calls us further, far beyond the places we know.

*What is the vision which calls us outside and beyond ourselves as a church?  
What is God calling us to do as we gather together by the river of life called Christ?*

Let's back up for a moment and consider something about Lydia and Philippi. The journey of Paul and his partners in faith is Europe's first introduction to the faith. Think about that – Lydia is our spiritual grandmother. Virtually everyone in this room is historically from Europe or Eastern Europe. All of us owe Lydia our faith, for she is the first European convert and the first lady of the first European church.

Consider, if you will, the history of the European church. Parts of that history are spectacular for her outreach to the poor and needy, for the love shown to others. Other parts are horrifying in the willingness to kill, torture and judge others. The European church is founded from this singular example of Lydia and her family and the ones who followed in that little church. That foundation was built on Paul's acceptance of Christ's strong invitation to follow him in that flash of light on the road to Damascus. Then, God invited Paul and Timothy and Silas to Macedonia. Lydia invited Paul to share the Gospel. Then she invited the apostles into her house. The European church, for all her difficulties, was originally founded on a solid rock of loving invitation and openness, where boundaries of faith, country, sex, power and status fell away.

Even many years later, after Paul and the other apostles had died, the Philippians still held firm to the foundation upon which their church was founded. Polycarp, who was martyred in about 166AD, wrote them a letter and in it he says to them:

*Mercy to you, and peace from God Almighty, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, our Saviour, be multiplied. I have greatly rejoiced with you in our Lord Jesus Christ, because ye have followed the example of true love [as displayed by God], and have accompanied, as became you, those who were bound in chains, the fitting ornaments of saints, and which are indeed the diadems of the true elect of God and our Lord; and because the strong root of your faith, spoken of in days long gone by, endureth even until now, and bringeth forth fruit to our Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sins suffered even unto death, [but] "whom God raised from the dead, having loosed the bands of the grave." "In whom, though now ye see Him not, ye believe, and believing, rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory;" into which joy many desire to enter, knowing that "by grace ye are saved, not of works," but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.*

*(ANF01/Polycarp/The\_Epistle\_of\_Polycarp\_to\_the\_Philippians/Salutation\_and\_Chapter\_I, EarlyFathers)*

The foundation of invitation and hospitality is the root of our church today, and we have Lydia and her church in Philippi to thank for it. But really, we have God to thank for it. God has provided us the example of what it means to make the invitation to gather at the river, to share in the river of life that flows from the throne of God and the Lamb by way of Jesus Christ. That is the root of my question to you: *Where and how is God calling us outside of ourselves, and how will we respond to the invitation? and how will we answer the invitation God has made to us in Christ?*

Where we go in answer to that invitation may be very different from where we thought we were headed. The way is not clear, and that is for a good reason. If you knew exactly what God was going to do with you, you would probably say no. There is only so much a person can know and then the experience itself must become the answer. In some ways, the need to know before we act is, at least when it comes to acts of faith, a signal that we are lacking trust in God and the Holy Spirit. I am certain Paul was not comfortable going to Philippi. I am certain Peter was not comfortable going to Cornelius and sharing his impartiality of God's work in Jesus Christ. I am certain Mary Magdelene was not comfortable visiting a tomb which turned out to

be empty, one she expected to hold the body of the Lord.

It is said of the great Celtic Saint Columba, who lived from 521AD to 597AD, that one day he felt called by God to start a new church, so he found a rudderless boat, so great was his trust in the Holy Spirit to lead him. He got in and allowed the will of God to lead him into the unknown. He came to land after several days, but could still see the shore from whence he came, so he shoved off again and eventually ended up on the island of Iona. From there, St. Columba and his brothers brought the Gospel to all of Scotland. Columba acted out of trust and sought to create yet another port of call along the streaming river of life from the City of God.

When I was a canoe counselor in the Boundary Waters, we used compasses and topographical maps to figure out where we were. Sometimes, though, everything looked the same. One wrong move and the markers on the map disappeared. Knowing we were headed east, west, north or south made no difference. In that situation, you can make several choices: you can stop, which is the common advice when you are lost; you can forge ahead and hope something makes sense later; or you can backtrack and get back to where you made the wrong turn. I have a pretty strong directional sense. If I see a map once, I can find my way pretty much anywhere from where I am. As a result, I like being lost. I am one of those people who keeps going when lost. I understand most people don't like that experience. But I trust my directional sensibilities, for the most part.

It is a scale of order greater and higher to trust the invitation of the Lord to go places you do not know and with which you have no experience. But we are called, I believe, to acquire a taste for being lost in the experience of the unknown. That is what worship is all about, finally, I believe. We have these rites and symbols and touchstones which we can see, hear, taste, feel and touch so we can remember what is the foundation of our faith – the invitation of the Lord calling us to live ever more deeply into the mystery of the living Christ.

The invitation to gather at the river of life is actually a two-fold invitation: First, it is an invitation to rest in the confidence the Lord provides. Psalm 36 puts it this way:

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.  
8 They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.  
9 For with you is the fountain of life;  
in your light do we see light. (Ps 36:7-9)*

Second, we are invited to go out, way out, in the name and trust of the Lord. We are encouraged by the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, which translates to something like The Encourager, to leave the comfort of our home, the support of family, the companionship of friends, perhaps everything we have ever known, and go to places and people we could never have imagined.

And when we answer the invitation, we are invited to share the invitation with others. God's invitation to us is extended to others in an invitation to join our family of faith. The image for what this has been like at its very best, what it is like when the church is at her best and what it will be like for all who accept the invitation is the City of God coming down from heaven in Revelation 21 and 22. We are, all of us, everyone, invited to gather at the river of life.

Perhaps you have felt it – that glimpse of the river of life, shining like pure crystal, flowing through the middle of the city, a city with the most beautiful garden you have ever seen in the middle of it, a garden where

the Tree of Life from Genesis is still blooming, giving its fruit to all on both sides of the river. Perhaps you have heard it – that faint sound of the Lord calling your name, because “*the sheep hear his voice and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out*” (Jn 10:3). Perhaps you have seen it – the healing that happens when the leaves of the tree of life are shared with all the nations of the world, that light which shines even in the darkness, the promise of God's light forever. Perhaps you know it – that, like Lydia and the women of Philippi, gathering together by the river to pray is the foundation of all who have been invited to participate by God.

This is why we gather at the table to partake of the cup of love and the bread of life, the body and blood of Jesus Christ, so we might remember what God has invited us to be a part of. Perhaps you are just hearing the invitation for the first time today. Our doors are open, our hearts are shaped by the love of God and Christ and our hope is for you to join us by the river. You are invited to gather with us by the river of life, Jesus Christ.

Shall we gather at the river and take communion together?