

“Paul’s Purple People Dealing Dream”
Revelation 21: 1-5, Acts 16: 9-15
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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
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Sixth Sunday of Easter

Perhaps the most contentious of the confrontational scenes in Acts 16-19 is the first one, which occurs in Philippi. It’s a showdown over who’s ultimately in charge of things. – Matthew Skinner

The first 12 chapters of the book of Acts tend to focus on the Apostle Peter and his dynamic ministry in the early church. Chapters 13 through 28 switch the focus to the Paul. From his dynamic conversion, to his courageous, passionate journeys.

Last week we heard about Peter’s bacon-wrapped lobster dream. This week we hear about Paul’s dream. The book of Acts is a book of dreams. These people are part of God’s dream team. Dreams in the book of acts are not detailed long-range plans with dates, times and flow charts. They are more like hunches, inklings, urges to move out, move on because out there, God is calling them to something, some place new. Exactly what it means is never quite clear in the beginning.

In today’s sermon, I’d like to share some insights from sociology. I would like to bring up 7 insights that sociology gives us about Acts chapter 16.

1. It takes place near a Roman city: Dominant culture: system of thinking based on fear, violence and bureaucracy.
2. Acts was written not long after there had been a Jewish rebellion against Rome. It took 10 men to form a Synagogue. If there was no Synagogue in the city: that meant either Jews did not feel comfortable living there, or they did not feel safe being public about their faith. One way or the other, this was an anti-Semitic city. So the Jews meet outside the city, on a riverbank.
3. In a time when women and men did not have social interaction, Paul openly talked with women!
4. Lydia is not just a personal name: it is the name of a region. It was not a Roman area. To call her by this name is to label her an outsider.
5. Gentiles and Jew were not supposed to talk together.
6. Lydia was a dealer in purple: Only the rich, famous, powerful could afford this cloth. Lydia deals with the rich, famous, powerful.

7. In a Male dominated world, Lydia is a Female who runs her own household. This is rare. She is a woman with wealth and power

And yet, given those social barriers, those walls of separation, what happens in this passage? Paul, who started his journey in a half-dreamed dream, not quite knowing what is required, but willing to go on a journey to find out, ends up discovering what the rest of God's dream for him was.

So here we see Paul living out the dream:

Paul talking with the woman, talking with this outsider;
Breaking down the walls of fear that separate people;
Breaking down walls of nationalism;
Breaking down walls of sexism;
Breaking down the walls of inter-religious hatred;
Breaking down the walls of economic exclusivism;
Breaking down the barriers between rich and poor.

To talk with someone outside of your social group was a statement.

To eat with someone outside of your social group was an affirmation.

To stay in their home was a profound public act of acceptance.

Staying in Lydia's home was not Paul's idea.

Lydia: Now that you've baptized us: prove it: stay with us.

Not just lip service. Dream the dream on our pillows.

Lydia persuaded Paul. Paul did not have an Ant-man ego. Paul was really smart. Lydia was smarter.

This simple story is a powerful series of statements. With their behavior, Paul makes the gospel public. The one who is converted is the one who takes the dream further. Walter Bruggemann defines faith as: a concrete, verbalized, open vision of what God will yet do."

Paul and Lydia give this open vision of enemies becoming friends. What a vision for the world. The faithful find their dream at the edge of the city. At the edge of society are the ones opening themselves to God. At the edge live the dreamers, living into the God given dream. God is out on the edge, giving a dream to the faithful. A dream that goes beyond the present circumstances, not controlled by the present social reality.

Lydia: seller of purple. It was the rich, famous and powerful who could afford to buy purple. We feel comfortable saying: Oh, yes, we accept the poor and downtrodden. Do we feel as comfortable saying, yes, we accept the rich and powerful? Is there a message of embrace for them too?

Lydia is an impressive woman. Looking at her, you might think: She is the embodiment of a success story. She has risen above all of the obstacles in her path. And yet, for all her power, wealth, success there is an emptiness. She is searching for something more.

She goes outside the walls of the city. Beyond the boundaries. To worship with the faithful. There is an emptiness that only God can fulfill. When Paul shares his faith, she finally hears the hope that she has been searching for desperately. She hears a message that makes her life worth living. There is an emptiness that only God can fill. In Jesus' message of ultimate love, Lydia finds the hope she needs to live.

It is an important insight for the church today: the church needs to have an inclusive vision for all people.

Then Lydia becomes a leader herself. An orientation figure: someone who helps others to find meaning, to find hope. Purple people dealing the dreams of God: making them become reality.

The memory of the church teems with purple people: women and men who have gone beyond the walls that society set up. People who thought differently, acted differently, taken risks, used their power.

Allen Boesak, Desmond Tutu, Ben Weir, Lech Walesa, William Sloane Coffin, Mother Teresa, Art Zannoni, Cecil Moore. Andrew Young was one of those people who used the power he had. The department stores in his city would only hire white people as sales people. They would only hire African Americans as janitors. It was against the law to hire them as sales people.

So Young led a boycott of the stores. The business people said: "How can we reach an agreement?" Young said: Well, people looking for something in the stores don't go to the sales people; they go to the janitors anyway, because they are the only ones who know where things are on the shelves. Why don't you hire them as sales people and see what happens? So the businesses hired them. They discovered the world did not fall apart. So then the politicians were willing to change the law to fit the practice.

People of faith and business people working together. It's an example of Christians inspiring people to use their status and power for a powerful witness to a life that matters, to a world that needs transformation, to stand for compassion and truth in the name of the God of sacrificial, resurrection love.

This message comes from the edge of society: people willing to be edgy: willing to think differently from the surrounding world.

Faith is not for conformists. Faith is for those who have received life and say "no" to the terrible power of hatred. Faith is living into the dream. For a long time we have been able to take it easy, without having to decide. Our world is now requiring of the faithful a decision for faith, or an apology for acting against faith. Today, the world is in enough of a crisis, that we need God's dreamers to open themselves to God's dream.

Paul speaks publically: breaks down walls: it changes lives. But the story goes on. Paul is about to get arrested, publically stripped naked, beaten and thrown into a dungeon. Spoiler alert: That is not the end of Paul's story. What it teaches us is that faith is costly. Faith is subversive, dangerous business.

The greatest journey of people of faith has not been taken by those who conform, but by the minority which has cared enough for a better world that they lived into the dream, even at great risk.

When the world of hatred tries to command us, we see ourselves with this small group by the river, outside the city: a place where this diverse group gathers: we stop and pray, we worship together and rise up because God has given us this dream: the dream gives us a yearning to go outside the walls, the dream gives us power: the power to be different.

There is a world that God is dreaming of. God has given that dream to the faithful. The dream surprises us: it comes to us against seemingly impossible odds.

The Bible is full of dreams that supply us with memories of resistance, against all these social forces and clustered values which pretend to be unbeatable.

Faith gives us a dream: a vision beyond our present realities, a dream that rises up against despair.

Miroslav Volf was born in Croatia, and had seen the hatred and violence of the Balkan war. He became a theology professor, and had given a lecture on embracing our enemies. In the time for the questions, another professor, Jurgen Moltmann stood up and asked a penetrating question: "But can you embrace a chetnik, [a notorious Serbian fighter known for the worst behaviors in the war]?"

Professor Volf thought for a long time, and then he replied, "No, I cannot – but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to."

I think that is such an honest and faithful answer. The dream of God is planted in us. Where it takes us, is not clear, and is not easy. But it gives us the conviction that another reality is possible. And we won't stop dreaming until that new world happens.

Matthew Skinner writes of the book of Acts: these people of faith had experiences that give them an "expanded vision of what is real and what is possible." New perspectives inspired, evoked and empowered by Jesus and the activity of his Spirit in their midst. A vision of a future where the world is different: more accepting, wider in its imagination, different in its behavior to the other. A world where hatred against other religions has no place.

Our next hymn was written by a friend of mine, Jeffrey Rowthorn. About the time this hymn was written, in the late 1970's, when issues of sexism and women's rights had been clearly raised, Jeff invited a group us to gather every week for a semester, to explore what those issues meant for us.

How we needed to become more aware of women's experiences, more aware of our sexist attitudes and behavior, more supportive of change. It was a practical experience of learning to live into God's dream.

Sometimes, the change begins with people talking together. Like Paul: gathering people together, talking, praying, singing, and not knowing where we are going. But opening ourselves up to live into God's dream for a new world, until that dream becomes reality.

Sources:

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