

“New Heaven, New Earth, New Believer” Richard E. Otty  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Revelation 21:1-5a; Acts 16:9-15; John 14:25-27

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Well, with the events of this week in politics, as I studied our Acts passages for both today and next Sunday, I had the thought, “Here goes Luke again. Luke, who also wrote the book of Acts, is once again playing... the woman’s card.” Or so it would likely have seemed to Celsus, a second century Greek who wrote the Christian faith appealed only to “the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children.” [Willimon, William, Acts, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 138.]

Gospel writer Luke portrays challenges to the Jewish, Greek and Roman cultures of his day. The likes of outcast Samaritans, powerless women, poor shepherds, and children are not only welcomed into the fold of faith, but often cited as models of faithfulness. In Luke’s Gospel, these relationships are with Jesus and his disciples; in the book of Acts, it is with his continuing disciples, and new ones like Paul. As we move toward Pentecost in two weeks, for the next two Sundays, Paul encounters women in his preaching and teaching, though it is clear it is not Paul, but the Holy Spirit bringing people to faith.

This morning we meet Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. The designation of the color purple alerts us to wealth. So, not only do we have a woman, but a wealthy woman, a businesswoman, and Luke will tell us it is her household that is baptized, and to her house to which Paul and his company are invited.

But before we hear our lesson, Lydia’s Macedonia was not in Paul’s original plans. In the verses preceding our lesson, Paul had printed directions from Mapquest – his route could not be altered because you can’t go from point A to point C, and skip B with printed directions.

Paul had picked up Timothy to accompany him, and even had him circumcised for good measure. The two of them went to Mysia, supposedly en route to Bithynia, until “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” They ended up in Troas. Troas sat at the edge of the Aegean Sea in modern day Turkey. It faced the province of Macedonia, today’s Northern Greece.

In our lesson, Paul has a vision of a man calling him over the sea to Macedonia. To do so will make his Mapquest printout completely useless. Better he had a GPS that would call out frantically his error, but eventually succumb to recalculation. In our lesson, they find their way to Philippi, a cosmopolitan city of elites, merchants, slaves, and descendants of retired Army officers who had given Caesar Augustus his great victory at Actium in 31 BC.

Let us hear of Paul’s call to Macedonia, where he meets Lydia in 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."<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.*

Our short gospel reading in John 14, is part of what is commonly referred to as Jesus' Farewell discourse. Spoken in a private setting with his disciples, Jesus seek to assure them that even after he is no longer with them, he will still be with them. In John's Gospel, Jesus breathed the Spirit on his disciples on Easter night. Our three verse lesson in John 14:25-27 is a preview of this event. Even before his death, Jesus gifts them with peace, his peace, a "not as the world gives" peace.

*<sup>25</sup>"I have said these things to you while I am still with you.<sup>26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.<sup>27</sup> Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

The synonyms for the Spirit, variously translated as Companion, Counselor, and Advocate are legal terms, giving the sense of the Spirit being a lawyer, one who stands with and advocates for. Yet, the descriptive words for the Spirit are more about teaching and encouraging, not defending. The Spirit also prompts memory. Jesus tells the disciples, the Holy Spirit will "teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." We also know the Spirit can lead to surprises.

Teaching, reminding, surprising. I am reminded of an interview I heard with singer Rosanne Cash, daughter of Johnny Cash. She talked about how her father had given her "the List," 100 country songs he believed she needed to learn. She resisted at first being told what to learn, but then realized he was right, and even created an album based on the list.

She also spoke about times she would, after her father's death, hear his voice on a sound system of a public space; while acknowledging a sense of connectedness and memory, she also admitted she didn't always appreciate her Dad showing up so unexpectedly and uninvited – that sense of both welcome and unwelcome surprise.

Memory, teaching, surprise – marks of the Spirit and peace Jesus gives, not that the world gives. Paul learned this in his own journeys.

Paul's teaching and preaching custom was to find a synagogue on the Sabbath. On this particular Sabbath, it seems he is guessing about where the synagogue is: "We went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer." Today we would quip Paul is exercising his manly right not to ask directions; yet, this seems to fit the flow of the Book of Acts with the Holy Spirit redirecting plans to place people in surprising places.

Enter Lydia – or more precisely, enter Paul into a gathering of women outside the city gate near the river. It seems to be a day when everyone went down to the river to pray. Here is revealed another surprise, for any notion of women's exclusion from the church is shattered, as they speak, not just "to the women," as was read, but the Greek can also be translated, they spoke "with the women."

Lydia is identified as a worshiper of God, and a dealer in purple cloth. Cloth dyed purple was expensive, reserved for the elite of society. Thus, Lydia's business of dealing in purple cloth would infer she was of the merchant, middle class of Philippi, fulfilling the textile desires of her wealthy customers.

I recall reading of John Woolman, a nineteenth century Quaker and tailor, and his refusal to make clothing of dyed fabric. He knew it would cost him business for people wanted such colors, but he knew slaves who worked with black and purple dyes often had health problems and early deaths. This health connection likely not known in Lydia's time, though even then it was probably the slave class of Philippi who would have handled the dyes for Lydia's cloth.

We don't know if Lydia was married, but Acts specifically states she and her household were baptized. The reference to "her household" stands against the norm of a patriarchal society in which women were considered property of a man's household. Add to that the note Lydia "prevailed" upon Paul and Timothy to stay at "her" home. While in tune with the Middle Eastern custom of hospitality, the Greek word for "prevailed" implies the request went against the norms of the day; again, in this case a woman prevailing upon men.

We also note that Luke uplifts a likely wealthy Lydia, while throughout his Gospel, the rich are regarded with scorn. This throws off any who automatically dismiss the wealthy from the faith community. Yet, an equal warning is given to any who would automatically give accommodation to wealth, or believe their faith is never compromised by the security we place in money.

Our lessons this morning surround us with the sustaining presence of God in Christ. Our lesson in Revelation rejoiced at God's dwelling place being with humankind, with the voice from heaven declaring, "See, I am doing a new thing." In John, Jesus gifted his disciples with a "not as the world gives" peace.

As the Holy Spirit moves through our lessons in Acts, it sustains an understanding the faithful may be led to "not as the world gives" places and take "I am doing a new thing" actions that counter cultural norm and worldly expectation.

Paul, had set travel plans – God sent a vision with a different route – not as the world gives, I am doing a new thing.

The religious norm was that teaching was done by men standing before a synagogue full of men – Paul and Timothy find themselves sitting along a riverbank gathering of women – not as the world gives, I am doing a new thing.

In Roman culture and Jewish society, men ruled – Acts tells us Lydia was head of her household – not as the world gives, I am doing a new thing.

Merchants who do business with the wealthy are wise to not to align themselves with controversial groups like Christians – Lydia and her household risked being baptized in Jesus' name – not as the world gives, I am doing a new thing.

John Woolman sacrificed lucrative tailoring work to stand against slavery – not as the world gives, I am doing a new thing.

As soon as we are so sure of how the world works, so sure how families are to be structured, so sure the route we have chosen in life is the only way, the Spirit of God can upset our plans with “not as the world gives” visions and “I am doing a new thing” revelations.

When Jesus gave his “not as the world gives peace” to his disciples, he was willing them a bequest. They were to be the recipients, and dwelling places of his peace. To think of our selves, as disciples, being recipients of a bequest from Jesus, being a dwelling place of his Spirit, is both humbling and frightening.

As we journey in our lives, may we keep alert to Jesus' “not as the world gives” proddings, and to his voice speaking to us as we make our everyday walks. In doing so, it may well be today's way to show his love will mean to alter our planned route home, or not speaking the bitter word right at the tip of our tongue, or pondering seriously how money compromises our acting in faith. We might even think of ourselves as new believers, like Lydia, welcoming God's new heaven, and new earth, and risking being part of God's new thing, ever confident Jesus' “not as the world gives” peace will sustain us.

The Spirit's role is not primarily to upset our plans or overrule our decisions, but to remind and teach us. In a way, the Spirit is like the list of essential songs Johnny Cash gave his daughter Rosanne to learn, and the memory sparked when she hears his songs being played. As one biblical commentator writes, “...the role of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, is to activate the memory banks of the community so they can remember Jesus' teachings.” [William Herzog, *Feasting on the Word Year C*, volume 2, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) p. 497.] I think that is a call of the church - to help each other activate the memory banks of the community so we can remember and live out Jesus' teachings.