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Sermon BUMC NOTES  
Acts 16:9-15  
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You'd think accepting Lydia's offer of hospitality would be a no brainer for Paul and his crew. Lydia was persuaded by their witness and she wanted IN on following the ways of Christ. This is Paul's very favorite thing, the whole reason why he is there in Philippi. You'd think he'd want to continue this conversation while spending time with Lydia and her household of newly baptized folks. Not to mention, lodging was not so easy to come by, travelers like Paul relied on the hospitality of strangers. And yet, it seems that Lydia had to talk them into accepting her generous offer. The text says Lydia "urged" them and "prevailed upon them" (Acts 16:15).

Maybe the men did not want to be a burden to Lydia by staying at her house. But I mean, they had to stay somewhere so this doesn't seem likely. I think what made Lydia have to convince them to accept her hospitality runs a little deeper.

In staying at Lydia's house, these Jewish-Christian teachers would have been staying at the home of Gentile-newly-Christian person. Gentile is a word that refers to anyone who was not Jewish. This would have broken the Law, would've made them unclean. It just was not something that faithful Jewish people did. The Law was God's gift to them about how to live faithfully.

But what's interesting is that the whole reason Paul is in Phillippi is to share what the Council of church leaders in Jerusalem just decided. Only one chapter before the story of Lydia, the church leaders deliberated and agreed that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses in order to be a part of the church. Their theological reasoning was that Gentiles were saved by the Grace of Christ just like they themselves are, and therefore did not have to convert to Judaism first in order to follow Christ.

This was REVOLUTIONARY! I don't think we realize often when reading Acts and the Epistles that follow, that the early church leaders were really wrestling with this question of if

and how Gentiles could become members of the church. And they wrestle with it, even after the Council of Jerusalem, because it was a really tricky thing to navigate given that the church began as a Jewish movement. The apostles were Jewish folks following Jesus, a Jewish rabbi. Though Jesus did interact with and minister to many Gentile folks, the majority of the movement was Jewish. And to follow Jewish Law is to not interact much with non-Jewish people. Eating with Gentiles or going to their home, or inviting them into your home, was breaking the law and would be going against how they believed for thousands of years that God called them to live.

But then Jesus is gone, ascended into heaven, and his followers received the gift he'd promised them, the Holy Spirit. And as they are following the Holy Spirit, they pretty quickly are led to preach and share the Good News of Jesus to Gentile people. And to their amazement, these non-Jewish people receive the Holy Spirit just like the Jewish folks did! This makes the apostles believe that God wants to include Gentiles in the church.

Though this much seemed clear, how to actually do this was tricky. Paul advocated passionately at the Council of Jerusalem that Gentiles did not need to be circumcised and follow the Law. He argued that the Law was not what saved people, but rather it was the grace of Christ, and that went for Jews as well as Gentiles. And ultimately, the Council agreed and sent out missionaries, including Paul to go and tell people this decision.

I imagine that Paul was probably thrilled when Lydia, a Gentile, was moved by the Gospel and decided to be baptized. Paul was just advocating that this is exactly what should happen. AND YET, when it comes to staying at Lydia's house, Paul and his crew paused. Paul, the great champion of inclusion, the one who debated in Jerusalem on behalf of Gentiles being welcomed into the church just as they are, hesitated.

I love that the Bible includes this detail. I think it shows us something that is true, and not just for Paul. It shows us the process of change is really hard and often long. It shows us that the radical, expansive, indiscriminate love of God is often easier to talk about, even debate

about, than to implement. It shows us that saying that everybody is “IN” and actually living like you believe that can be two very different things.

This moment of hesitation shows us an opportunity for Paul and the others to put **their theology about the indiscriminate grace of Christ into action.** It required these Jewish folks to go against their culture, what they had been taught all of their lives, and what they believed was an act of faithfulness to God. It was no small feat. Lydia, someone new to the ways of Christ, encouraged them and instructed them that the grace of Christ really was enough. In listening to Lydia, they were able to align their words and their actions, the kind of expansive love they believed God was leading them in, and what they actually did.

I believe that this story demonstrates a challenge that we all face as people who are trying to follow Christ today. The challenge of aligning our actions with our beliefs. I felt this challenge presented to me at a vigil at Glendale High School a couple of weeks ago where immigrants rights activists urged us to stand up for our neighbors being disappeared by ICE. I believe that is most definitely a way that we can and need to align our theology and our actions and be actively on the side of the marginalized like Jesus is. We need to stay engaged with our neighbors who are under threat of ICE and advocate for all to be treated fairly and humanely regardless of their immigration status. Because Belmont is the welcoming, inclusive church that it is, the call of the Holy Spirit in this direction is probably what you feel, too, and what is coming to your mind as I talk about this story from Acts.

But I was reminded this week of time recently when I was called to catch up to the Holy Spirit, to align my actions with my beliefs, in a way that was unexpected. For several semesters I taught as an adjunct professor at Belmont University's School of Theology. I was assigned to teach a class that is ambitiously titled “Understanding the Bible.” I am a product of Belmont’s School of Theology and I experienced so much transformation and, honestly, radicalization as a student in classes such as this one. Because of this I was eager to be on the other side of the classroom and I really enjoyed it. At first I received some really lovely feedback from students

about how I was helping them to think differently about God and their faith in a way that felt more expansive and liberating. That felt really good to hear. Then, I got some feedback that did not feel so good. A couple of students said that I did not create a space where everyone was valued and heard, but rather that I clearly favored students who shared my same liberal beliefs and would shut down anyone else who disagreed.

OUCH. Receiving that feedback really, really hurt. Naturally I spiraled into a puddle of self-pity and called all the people who love me most to assure me that these students were disgruntled anomalies and not at all correct in their assessment. Then, when I had calmed down, I realized that this feedback, though really tough to hear, offered me a chance to notice a blindspot where my actions were not keeping pace with my theology. I was not acting in alignment with the indiscriminate love of God that I try very earnestly to follow. I realized it was an opportunity to reconcile my actions with my beliefs. It was honestly an opportunity to repent, to turn another way, to try again to aim for embodying and expressing my deepest held belief that all people are beloved by God.

You and I might not have the same blindspots, but I offer you this example of one of mine to say that sometimes where the Holy Spirit is calling us, where the boundless love of God is calling us, is not where we expect. It may be calling us to share love to folks who we really would feel justified not doing so because what they believe feels so at odds with what we think is true about God. And yet, y'all means all, right? And yet, God calls them beloved, too.

I don't think that the lesson from this negative feedback I received is to never voice what I believe about God in the classroom or that I should be shy about condemning acts of injustice and dehumanization and the kind of theology that supports them. Rather, I think the lesson is that if I really believe everyone is beloved by God, that really means everyone. And I want how I treat people, including those who believe differently from me, people who quite frankly I think are dead wrong, in alignment with their own belovedness.

After the story of Lydia we read this morning, Paul is arrested and then miraculously released from prison and asked to please leave the city of Phillippi. On his way out of town, it says that he stopped by Lydia's home and "when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed" (Acts 16:40). Brothers and sisters is how Paul addresses the Christians in his letters. Calling the people gathered at Lydia's home brothers and sisters means that by the end of their experience in Philippi, Paul sees them as part of the church. (It also means that Lydia is leading the church in her home, a point I just can't help but make.) Paul's use of this phrase means that after his experience with Lydia, accepting her hospitality, being instructed by her to believe that Christ's grace is enough, Paul really does see her and other Gentile Christians as his siblings, as equal members of the family of Christ. I think it shows that his actions caught up to his theology as he followed on the heels of the Holy Spirit who is always out ahead of all of us calling us into greater, more expansive love.