SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Alternative Routes & Detours”* Acts 16:9-15

In talking about Paul’s meeting Lydia, we are all likely to marvel at her receptiveness, and Paul’s art of persuasion. Scholars also like to point out that Lydia was the first European convert, and the importance of the fact that she was a woman.

But while we do celebrate Lydia’s openness and her acceptance of the faith, most of us also wonder, why? Why and *how* is this possible? How did she come to faith so *quickly* and decisively? What did she hear? What did Paul say—he must have been an incredibly *powerful* speaker!

Well, yes, I do believe he was. However, I also think Lydia heard something that she, and all of us, are waiting to hear. Before we get to that, let us consider who Lydia was. As we have noted, Lydia was a woman.

We can also surmise that she was a very wealthy woman. As I was telling the children earlier, she delt in a luxury product. In today’s economy, she would have sold something like luxury cars or Rolex watches. So, she not only sold a luxurious product, but she also would have had to mingle with rich and powerful people.

As a businesswoman, she might have met and sold her cloth to other women of wealthy households, but to run the business—the manufacturing side of things—she would have had to deal with men of all ranks and class. She would have to deal with other merchants—suppliers and vendors of tools and raw materials. She would have had to have hired men to work in the production and delivery, and in all other aspects of the production of her product, of making a profit, and of establishing a good reputation in the town of Philippi, etc.

This would have been quite a feat in a world and a time where women were not afforded all the rights and privileges men enjoyed. I can only wonder just how hard she had to fight through each and every day, just to keep her business and household together. She would have had to have been a very strong woman, very determined.

She also would have had to have been *shrewd.* That is, by nature and by necessity, Lydia would not have been astute and discerning. She would *not* have been a “push over,” nor an “easy sell.” And in fact, as we heard in the passage that was read for us, it is *she* who is able to offer hospitality to Paul and his friends in such a way that he was not able to refuse.

‘“If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord,” she says to Paul, “come and stay at my home.”’ In other words: if you truly believe I have accepted Christ—if you believe you have done your job and made me a Christian, then you will accept my invitation.

“And she prevailed upon us,” says Paul.

So, what was it that convinced this strong, independent, determined woman? What did she hear as Paul spoke to her and the other woman at the river that day?

One writer, Prof. Jennifer Kaalund of Iona College in New York, painted a compelling portrait of Lydia in this way:

*Although they meet in Philippi, Lydia is from Thyatira. Since she is living in Philippi, it seems that Lydia is away from a place she once called home, a place with which she is still affiliated. Perhaps this made her particularly attuned to the needs of the group of men travelling declaring the word of the Lord….She welcomes strangers in a place where she once was a stranger.*

That last sentence is especially important because in it Paul and Lydia are described as one stranger who finds truth and goodness in the words of another stranger. Indeed, Lydia finds a spiritual home—a place of rest and welcome—in the life story of Jesus Christ, and in Paul’s own story of having his heart changed in an instant from murderous to compassion and acceptance.

In this story of Christ, Lydia does *not* have to be strong nor constantly determined and shrewd. She can allow herself to rest and trust—she can trust and rest in Christ.

In Paul’s story, she hears how a strong, determined man was transformed *without* loosing his strength and determination. Through him, Lydia learns that compassion and caring for others need *not* include being vulnerable or helpless. In fact, by the end of this chapter, Lydia will also see Paul’s conviction tested as he and his companions are arrested, beaten, and thrown in jail.

My point, and what is recorded for us in this story, is that Lydia was an “outlier.” In many ways, despite her success, she was alone. In many ways because she was *not* one of the norm when it came to women of her time. You could say she was “ahead of her time,” but the truth is that there are women and men like her all over the place, and this has always been true.

There are lots of people who are alone—lots of people who feel alone, so terribly alone…until, someone like Paul comes along and shares the story of Jesus Christ; until someone comes along and offers friendship. When we are confounded at how quickly Lydia comes to faith, we need to also factor in how deeply she was touched by a story of a God whose dedication to each and every one of us is so complete that even the threat of suffering and death could not and has not diminished God’s faithfulness to us.

In Lydia’s case, the love of God came and found her beside a river one morning. It found her even though Paul was looking for someone else. Indeed, this was not even the place Paul thought God wanted him to be. (He thought he was supposed to be in Macedonia.)

You and I know the love of God, that is why we are here. We know its worth. We know what it has done and continues to do in our lives and in the life of this church.

The love of God has caused us to stop along our individual journeys, and caused us to come together as a church of friends, and disciples, and in that ministry, we have made detours in our lives for people who have found themselves cast out, along the road. We have built programs—even buildings—to shelter them, to save their lives. Yes, to even *save their lives*.

We talk about salvation here in our church and mostly we think of it in terms of “saving souls” for Christ—and we do that, but have you ever noticed?—We also save *lives*.

We have saved women from physical and emotional abuse.

We have saved young people from unsafe living conditions, from loneliness, and bad company by providing them a place to live and good, nourishing meals, and…kindness.

We have saved house-less families from life unsafe living conditions. We have even protected them with our presence here on campus during their stay.

Friends, at this time in history, we are called upon more than ever before to save lives. And we can do it, we can save people from loneliness and fear by showing as many as we can the love we know, and the life we have been given. We can offer others a safe place to *be* where they need not be afraid. And if we can do that, then fear and loneliness will *not* turn to frustration or anger, and anger will not turn to despair, and despair will not turn to violence.

We can save lives, but it will require that we step off the beaten path and take a detour to a place and to people we have not planned on being with. But like Paul, we can rely on the Spirit to take us to *exactly* the place God wants us to be.

…The other night in Bible Study, we all wondered about Lydia and why or how she because so convinced and converted so quickly. I believe are answer is that Paul opened a door into a community of life, and she walked through.

So have we, and God willing, so will we. I pray we will make as many detours and take as many alternative routes as we find them. I pray we will rejoice over a Spirit that detoured to find each one of us, and I look forward to our journey together and the people God will send to us to shelter, to lift-up, and to love in God’s name.

May God bless us on our way! Amen!