

Wesley United Methodist Church                      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
May 26, 2019 – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Title: Sent – By A Loving God  
Scripture: Acts 16:9-15  
John 14:23-29

He could never have imagined what he would be doing. He was a devout Jew and strongly committed to keeping his faith pure and untainted by those around who threatened what he thought was most important. In his zeal to protect his faith, he had stood by and watched as a young man was killed. He had traveled extensively to find the subversives who were threatening what he held sacred.

Then one day while traveling to a city to find some of those subversives, and arrest them, something happened. Suddenly he was blinded by a bright light and fell to the ground. A voice asked him, “Why are you harassing me?” The voice continued, “I am Jesus, whom you are harassing. Now get up and enter the city. You will be told what you must do.” (CEB, Acts 9:4-6)

For the next three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything, until a man named Ananias came to him, restored his sight and explained to him what had happened. From that day forward his life was different. No longer did he try to arrest the subversives. Instead he joined them and became one of the greatest missionaries the world would ever know.

Saul, or Paul, began to preach about Jesus in the synagogues. “He is God’s Son,” he declared. He devoted the rest of his life to telling everyone who would listen about Jesus. He traveled extensively and began churches in towns throughout the area. He wrote letters to the

churches he had begun and on more than one occasion he was arrested by the Roman authorities for his actions. Ultimately, he gave his life for this new faith.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles we find him responding to a dream, or a vision, of a man from Macedonia pleading with him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul went to Macedonia; to Europe to the city of Philippi – a thoroughly Gentile city, something he could never have imagined himself doing earlier.

On the sabbath, he looked for a place where some Jewish people might have gathered to worship and to pray. He found a group of women and among them was Lydia, a Gentile, a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth – expensive clothing worn by royalty and other rich clients. She was eager to hear and embrace what Paul had to say. Lydia became the first Christian convert in Europe, and the first woman to be named in the history and story of the spread of this new way.

In his dramatic experience on the road to Damascus, Paul had encountered the risen Christ. He described that the Lord said to him, "Go! I will send you far away to the Gentiles." (CEB, Acts 22:21) Paul was sent out by a loving God who not only changed his life but the lives of many people. People who would directly or indirectly be touched by this mission, this sending, this proclaiming and sharing. People whose lives would be changed by the establishment of small home churches where people gathered, worshipped and prayed and where they learned how to live their lives as faithful followers of the God who sent Jesus to live among us.

Like Paul, we are also sent out by a loving God, but for most of us our experience is not likely to be as dramatic as his was. Some of us have spent our entire lives, or most of our lives, involved with the church in some

way. We may have gone to Sunday School as children, participated in youth fellowship and maybe even a young adult group. Some of us have taught Sunday School, sung in the choir, served on various committees and we think we know our place in the church. We think we know what is expected of us and what we expect of others.

There can be comfort in this, but there is also a danger or a challenge in this. When we think we know what is expected of us and what we expect of others life can be relatively peaceful, but then there is a danger of becoming so comfortable that we don't know what to do when things change – and change is inevitable.

Often, we don't notice the changes taking place in our lives because they are so gradual. We don't notice the extra pound that gradually shows up or the slightly longer time it takes for us to get up from a chair. In one of the churches I served, one of the more senior members of the church came to me one day. She told me that when she had arrived at the church about 40 years earlier, she had noticed, in her words, all the "little old ladies sitting near the front of the church. Through the years she had slowly moved from the back of the church closer to the front of the sanctuary and that day she had looked around and said she just realized that she was now "one of those little old ladies sitting in the front".

There is a danger in becoming so comfortable that we think everyone wants the same things that we do; that our way is the only way. Years after coming to Philippi that first time and meeting Lydia, Paul wrote to the church that had formed in that community. This was one of the letters written while Paul was in prison sometime between 55 and 62 AD. His letter emphasizes joy but not just as joy in the moment. He focuses also on

a dispute between two church leaders. He also knows that the church is facing harassment.

Knowing all of this, and knowing that they are worried about him being in prison, he writes, “Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love being united, and agreeing with each other. Don’t do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:” (CEB, Philippians 2:1-5)

This central message to the Philippians is that Christians are to work for the good of others, rather than putting their own good first. That message applies to the church today. Instead of getting comfortable and focusing only on our own needs, the church today if it is to be vibrant and alive is to look after the needs of others. Why? Because Jesus put our needs ahead of his.

When Jesus knew that he would soon be killed, he tried to prepare his disciples for how to live when he was no longer with them. In today’s Gospel reading, he tells them that the Holy Spirit will come to them and teach them everything, and remind them of all that Jesus had said to them. Then we hear words that we often hear at Christian funerals. “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.” (NRSV, John 14:27)

This particular piece was part of a devotional this week that I listen to. It said, “This peace that Jesus speaks of... what is it? It clearly isn’t just a

state of untroubled calm. It's not some kind of floaty detachment, a carefree lack of concern about others, and about the tensions and struggles of today's world. What is this peace like? ...

“When we are gripped by fear or agitation, it can immobilize us. To those who want it, Jesus gives a peace which frees us from this grip, from these immobilizing effects, and allows us to engage with life in its fullness and complexity.”<sup>i</sup>

This really caught my attention. The peace that Jesus gives to his disciples and to us is one that frees us from the grip of immobilizing fear or agitation and that allows us to “engage with life in its fullness and complexity.”

I believe that it was this peace that empowered Paul to travel throughout the area and go even to Europe to share the news of Jesus. It was this peace that allowed him, even while he was in prison, to write to one of the churches he had established and speak to them about joy.

When we find these words in John's gospel, I was reminded this week that we can hear these words on three different levels. First, these are the words that Jesus spoke to his disciples as he was facing his death and preparing them to go on without him, as he was preparing them to be sent out into the world to witness to God's great love.

However, John's gospel was written to first century Christians who were being persecuted for their faith. John, in using Jesus' words, is encouraging these persecuted Christians to realize that Jesus' promises, blessings and commands were meant for them also. “John was assuring his early Christian readers that Jesus had not left them orphaned, that the Spirit was with them, that God loved them if only they would respond with love for one another.”<sup>ii</sup>

Finally, the gospel of John also speaks to us, and assures us that the future that we look for is already unfolding. “We, like the first century Christians, also live in the ‘already-here-but-not-yet’ new earth of God. We, too, are promised the peace that comes with God’s new age.”<sup>iii</sup> We, too, are promised a peace that helps us engage life with all its fullness and all its complexity.

For Paul, it meant that even if he was sometimes afraid, he did not need to be paralyzed by his fear. For us, it means that even when we face changes in our lives, we can face them knowing that we are not alone, that the Holy Spirit is with us, and reminds us, when we most need it, of Christ’s presence with us, of God’s love for us, and that no matter what we face, we can face it with a peace that cannot be explained apart from God.

Jesus’ final words to his disciples were to send them out with what we call the Great Commission. “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20).

In one of the books that the Next Chapter team has been reading, we are reminded that “The imperative in those verses is ‘go.’ But as we go, there are several sub-commands. We are to make disciples. We are to baptize. We are to teach. Those are a lot of action words.”<sup>iv</sup>

This requires at least two points of obedience from us. We are to go, and we are to depend totally upon the power of Christ. That’s why Jesus reminds us, “I am with you always.”<sup>v</sup>

Thom Rainer, in this book, notes that “Going in Christ’s power requires effort. Certainly the results are dependent upon Him, but

obedience is work. And obedience in His power means that we are praying to Jesus so we can reach others. That requires an 'other' focus. That requires us to look beyond ourselves."<sup>vi</sup>

The reality is that this can be uncomfortable. Being sent by a loving God may mean inviting a neighbor or friend to church with us. It may mean sharing how God has helped us face the difficult things in life. Being sent by a loving God may mean allowing ourselves to be challenged in ways that may, at first, seem uncomfortable and even frightening.

I remember when I first believed that God was calling me into parish ministry, I had lots of excuses, lots of reasons why God was making a mistake and why God had the wrong person. Once I stopped saying "no" and started saying, "maybe" the things that I saw as mountains and huge obstacles became small hills and opportunities to look at life differently.

No matter who we are, or what our circumstances in life, we are still sent by God into the world to be witnesses for Christ. We are sent to share what we have come to know. We are sent by a loving God into a world that needs desperately to hear about and to experience a God of love, acceptance and inclusion.

The story is told of a statue of Jesus that during World War II had its hands sheared off as the result of damage from a bombing. The story is told that rather than repair the statue, the people of the church decided to leave it with its hands missing. Instead they put a sign at the base of the statue that says, "Christ has no hands but yours." This is a reference to a poem attributed to St. Teresa of Avila who lived in the 1500's.

As we are sent by a loving God, let me share the words of that poem with you, as a commission to us.

Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which he looks  
compassion on this world.  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Pray as You Go, for May 21, 2019. PAYG app for mobile phones or <https://pray-as-you-go.org/>

<sup>iii</sup> Keeping Holy Time, Year C Material for 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid

<sup>v</sup> Rainer, Thom S. Autopsy of a Deceased Church, 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive. P.41

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid

<sup>viii</sup> [https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)