

**6 Easter – Year C – May 12, 2010 - Homily**  
**Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29**  
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Several years ago, Gallup – of the famous Gallup polls, did a survey of Presbyterians asking whether any of them had experienced a vision from God. Who wants to guess how the results came out? An amazing fifty percent of church members said that they had received a vision from God. There's an interesting push-pull effect at play though. For example, we like to read magazines like Guideposts, where true stories of God's miracles and visions are shared to inspire us. We even love to hear stories of how the Holy Spirit has worked in the lives of others, and yet we can be quite shy about sharing our own visions from God. Heavily influenced by the prevailing culture of our day, could it be that we have lost the sense of the mysterious, or forgotten the unseen cloud of witnesses, and even the principalities and powers that Paul teaches us about? We have taken the road of rationality almost to the extreme, such that anything out of the ordinary makes us nervous and fearful of ridicule. Anything that we can't prove scientifically, must be a magic trick or a hoax. On the other hand, how can we possibly prove something as essential to our human nature as love?

On Sunday, we looked at the Gospel reading and how Jesus promises to send the Advocate to remind and teach His disciples about everything He has said. The story in this evening's reading from the Acts of the Apostles would definitely have made it into the first century copy of Guideposts, if it had existed then. What are the odds? Paul receives a vision from God – a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Firstly, the presumption is that Paul, like so many other deeply spiritual and faithful people, is open to visions from God. Obviously, this is not the first time God has appeared to him. Think about his life changing experience on the Road to Damascus, for example. Second, travelling was not just a matter of hopping on a plane and arriving safely at the destination, renting a car and driving into town. Paul's journey, was difficult and complicated, it was dangerous, lengthy and had many stopping points along the way. The vision was to go to Macedonia, and so it seems reasonable to head for Philippi, a major city of Macedonia. Then what? By one estimate, the city of Philippi probably had a population of fifteen thousand, not to mention visitors and others who were just passing through. I can't tell you how often someone will say to me, "Oh, you're from England, do you know so and so from such and such a town or city?" In reality, that's not as easy as it sounds! Next, if Paul were following the vision faithfully, he would be looking for a *man* who he might recognize from the vision, or who might make himself known when he heard Paul and his companions preaching the gospel, right? In fact, what does happen is that Paul seeks a place of prayer outside the city gates on the Sabbath, and ends up talking with precisely the person that God has sent him to meet. Not a man, but a woman called Lydia. A woman who apparently does not need the help of a man, since she is a wealthy business owner and head of her own household. Yet Paul does not let any of these small details stand in the way of being continually led by the Holy Spirit.

Again, really what are the odds? If the Holy Spirit had not been the guiding influence here I would have gone with something like several thousand to one of Paul finding the person or persons he was meant to find. Now from Lydia's perspective the odds are way higher. Lydia

is a God-fearer. She is attracted to the Jewish faith, and especially to the One God of Jewish worship, but she is still a gentile. We have to believe that the Holy Spirit has already been working on Lydia. The Holy Spirit has prepared Lydia's heart to hear, receive, and understand the Good News of Jesus Christ. Lydia is decisive in her belief and decides immediately to be baptized after hearing the gospel shared by Paul and his companions. According to Professor Cole-Turner, "She is decisive because she is discerning. She is discerning because God has opened her heart to a new level of perception. Her perceptive ability is a gift of the Holy Spirit because she is already worshipping God. Her desire to worship comes from being hungry for God and God's truth." Even as a successful businesswoman in her own right, she is hungry for more than worldly success because the restless Holy Spirit has stirred her heart and soul with longing. Lydia's encounter with Paul goes against all the patriarchal norms of Roman culture, and the norms of Jewish propriety. Her own status as a wealthy and independent businesswoman is also unusual to say the least, as well as being a woman in charge of her own household. To make matters more astonishing, Lydia was from Thyatira. Through this incredible God-incidence, a story retold for us almost casually, we witness the intersection between divine initiative and human obedience. After being baptized, Lydia's open heart immediately prompts her to exercise her God-given gift of hospitality and open up her home to Paul and a new community of faith in Philippi.

Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Lydia becomes a faithful leader in the early church. There is no concern about her being a woman. In fact, the early church had several women leaders. There are also a few other details we need to notice here. Paul is not just a Jewish follower of Christ, to Lydia, a woman of Macedonia; he is very much a foreigner. Macedonia is modern-day Greece, and that makes Lydia the first recorded European convert to Christianity. Given these circumstances, what else, but the transformational movement of the Holy Spirit could explain Lydia's insistence that Paul and his companions stay at her home? We are talking radical hospitality to a strange, male foreigner – cutting right across massive cultural barriers and norms.

The Book of Acts models this cultural openness as God's mission proceeds to the ends of the earth, and especially where there is need. There is no doubt that prayer and worship both play a transformative role in faithful ministry – then and now. You and I may hear this reading as the prompting of the Holy Spirit as well. Such that we are called to consider our own mission to our neighbors – both near and far. Has God already given us a vision of radical hospitality – one where we too are transformed to the point of opening our own home to strangers and foreigners? Is this more than offering a neighborhood block party? Does it extend to making a stand for respecting the dignity of all God's children, even when that means going against the grain of resistance to migrant workers? Are we afraid of the vision of God's graciousness? When was the last time we took a great leap of faith and let the Holy Spirit direct our steps? May we all continue in prayer, worship and discernment. May we never forget that we must *be* the Body of Christ to the world, sharing God's vision of love, and helping those who are in need.

Amen.