

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, May 1, 2016)

Texts:

Acts 16:9-15 (NRSV)

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." 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.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 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. 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. 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. 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.

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Who, How and Where God Calls"**

As we heard in our children's story today ("Miss Rumphius" by Barbara Cooney), there are many people God calls to service, many ways TO be called to God's service and many places in WHICH to be called to God's service.

Just as Miss Rumphius heard the call of the spirit to make the world a more beautiful place, so our Miss Lydia in today's story from the Acts of the Apostles responded to the call of the spirit to open her heart and her home to the message of love that she heard from Christ's apostles. As she worshipped and prayed there by the riverside with the other women the spirit had called, Lydia wasted no time in asking the apostles to baptize her in the river right then and there, as the spirit opened her heart to the word and she opened the door to her home, inviting, nay, prevailing upon the apostles to be her guests.

One woman traveled the world and then planted flowers across American hillsides to bring beauty to the earth, another woman sat by the river, probably never traveling far from her tiny Thyatira, dying cloth and becoming the first convert to the early church in Europe as an Asian woman; the only thing seeming to connect them being the color purple that bloomed from propagated lupine seeds and spread across hand-woven cloth as it absorbed the dye from the root of madder shrubs that lined the hills of an ancient town.

But even more than a color connection, these women share something that we see throughout the early church and down through the history of the church bringing us to today. That is the work of the Spirit to call in unexpected places, to quite unsuspecting people and in very surprising ways.

As we looked at this wonderful story of Lydia during our LEAP of Faith session Wednesday night, we mused about the amazing woman Lydia must have been. As the scriptures describe her as a "dealer in purple cloth" we can assume that such a profession would have brought her great wealth as purple cloth was a luxury at the time reserved for the wealthy or royalty since the original dye came from what our curriculum told us was, "a painstaking process using large quantities of shellfish called murex."

Ah, but Lydia must have also been one smart cookie as she joined other artisans from her area in discovering how to create purple dye from the root of the common madder shrub as I mentioned earlier.

We can also speculate that she had great interest in matters of the spirit and was a seeker at heart as she gathered with women by the river to pray indicating that Thyatira had no synagogue where Paul would usually have preached and taught. Her interest and her willingness to step out in faith by opening her heart and her abode results in her home serving as the gathering place for the Philippian Christian community as we can infer by the final verse of Acts 16.

Our text for today opens with another kind of call – this one coming through a vision wherein Paul sees a man from Macedonia standing over him and asking him to, “help us.” And how does Paul respond? Not with questions or denials or a handful of antacid tablets but with an immediate willingness to get the others traveling with him and begin the rather perilous journey to cross over to Macedonia to bring the good news.

As I wondered aloud at our Bible study on Wednesday night, I couldn’t help but think such a vision today would prompt most people to see a psychiatrist or, at the very least their pastor, who would probably counsel Paul to form a discernment committee and come up with a plan and some new sandals before heading out.

And, of course, sometimes that’s not such a bad idea. But in both instances in our text today, the call of the spirit, coming in such different ways and at different places and to very different people is received with utmost clarity and responded to with decisive action.

Where and how does God call to you today? Are there times when you find yourself mired in indecision, hearing a call on your heart but unsure or, perhaps, afraid to follow it?

I’d like to encourage you to go for it. Take a step into the unknown. Let God lead you forward by taking action on whatever it is you’re being called to do. If it’s not the right way, God will show you that. If it IS the right path, God will continue to open door after door and you will encounter more and more people along the way who will help and encourage you to be the person God wants you to be. But you have to respond, step out and walk through that curtain of fear that so often keeps us from being all that God desires us to be.

(The following stanzas are pulled from “Teach Me Your Ways” by Ted Loder)

“Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may be open to the same Spirit
 who moved over the face of the waters
 in the first day of creation
and moves over the chaos of this time
 to fashion a day like this,
 a world like ours,
 a life like mine,
 a kingdom like leaven in bread,
 like a treasure
 buried in the fields of the
 daily I plow;...

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may accept my own talent openly,
nurture it hopefully,
develop it faithfully,
and give it freely...

Teach me your ways, Lord,
that I may be swept up in worship
with the saints,
which surges in wonder,
gratitude, and obedience,
and shapes my life into an irrepressible
YES to you,
to all my sisters and brothers,
and to the presence of the kingdom
among us

until the ancient vision of mothers burns in me with a fire to light the world
and warm is heart,
through Jesus Christ,
the singer of passionate songs,
the teller of powerful stories,
the artist of daring ways.

Amen.