

Come and help us

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It's every evangelist's dream come true: the stranger who comes right out and [pleads for our help](#). Paul's [enthusiasm](#) seems well placed. Up to this point Acts has been story after story of the Holy Spirit's guidance, of multiple baptisms and conversions.

Except for this: in the [passage](#) preceding this week's reading, the Holy Spirit forbids Paul to go to Asia, and the spirit of Jesus won't allow the band into northwest Asia Minor. By the time Paul dreams of Macedonia, he's had his vision for ministry rebuked by multiple members of the Trinity.

It's telling that the lectionary passage begins with the successful vision. In these days of reforming the church—of visionary leaders and vision statements—pastors may begin to believe that if they sit and listen long and hard enough, they will stumble upon the ideal path. Many feel called (whether by their congregations or by God is not entirely obvious) to find the one thing that will inspire consensus and passion, that will somehow reveal itself to be “the vision of God for this church.”

But Paul's certainty comes only after several failed attempts to discern the spirit's leading. I take some comfort in this, but it makes me nervous too. If Paul and company are struggling to hear the voice of God, how are we to hone our listening skills?

The Macedonian man's words are instructive: “Come over. . .and help us.” Someone only asks for aid when there is need. Our vision may well be dependent on the expressed needs of those around us. Of course human beings aren't always the best at discerning the difference between wants and needs. It's easy for needs-oriented evangelism to blur into consumer marketing.

Yet Paul takes the Macedonian man at his word—the early Christian evangelists were readily persuaded that people might actually need the gospel. In progressive

mainline circles, this can be hard to understand. "People *need* Jesus? I don't know about all that. . ." We're far more likely to try to convince others that they *want* Jesus than to take as given that they *need* him.

It's appropriate for this text to come up on Mother's Day. Parents struggle to know how to share whatever truth they've encountered. They aren't sure what their kids need for success or how to help them achieve it. How do we avoid permissiveness without wandering into authoritarianism? How do we help children discern the differences between their wants and needs? How do we give them a vision of the good and holy life and teach them how to lead it when so often we are afraid of pushing our beliefs on them?

As a parent and a pastor, I'm moved by this [from Paul Tillich](#):

There are two principles we should follow in the religious education of our children. The first is that the questions which are really in the hearts of the children should be answered and the children should be shown that biblical symbols and the Christian message are an answer to just these questions. And secondly, we ought to seek to shape their existence in the direction of the questions which we believe are the more universal ones. This would be similar to what we do. . .in the mission field. We seek to answer their questions and in doing so we, at the same time, slowly transform their existence so that they come to ask the questions to which the Christian message gives the answer.

Preachers are often ambivalent about discussing Mother's Day, and for good reason—12 percent of the reproductive-age population has experienced infertility. Still, the conversion of Lydia's household is a good opportunity to think about how the gospel is conveyed in families, homes, churches and throughout the known world.