

Blogging toward Sunday (Acts 16:9-15)

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In this series, authors offer reflections on the Sunday lectionary texts.

Here is a narrative in which a vision leads to a new practical beginning. Paul was ready for a vision. He was seeking a way of ministry “out of no way.” That new way was given “in a vision,” a perception of reality outside the ordinary and beyond all conventionalism. This “chief apostle” is “on the loose,” unencumbered and ready for what is given by God—not a bad characterization of the church and its ministry when that ministry is not imprisoned in old thought categories or paralyzed by its traditions (or its property).

The vision led to proclamation of the news. This “pre-institutional” church was free for news that challenged all old patterns and that invited to new life. We are not told the substance of his preaching. But we know it from his preaching in Acts and in the Epistle, even given the critical tension between the two. The news is that in Jesus of Nazareth, the world has become open to God’s generosity; Paul’s listeners are invited to generosity based on God’s bottomless mercy. Paul did not need a vision to get “the message.” He needed a vision only to find a venue for his preaching.

That venue, to which he came almost randomly, (a) was in a place already known as a place of prayer, (b) was on the day of sabbath when routines of management are suspended and there is a patterned receptivity, and (c) was an assemblage of women. I doubt if I would make much generically that here, as with Dorcas, it is a woman. . . except to notice that Paul’s subjects appear to be particularly open and receptive, likely the work of the Spirit and not “gender advantage.”

In any case, Paul’s “good news” reaches Lydia. We may observe two things about Lydia. First, she listened eagerly to what was new to her...even though she was already “a worshiper of God.” She listened and, consequently was baptized and

embraced a new life.

Second, she responded with hospitality (v. 15). Perhaps everyone wanted to host “the visiting preacher.” We are not told. But observe; *preaching evokes hospitality*, a most crucial gift and practice in the early church (see Rom. 12:13). We are not told more than that; but let us entertain the thought that Lydia, newly baptized, embodied the teaching modeled by the departing Jesus. “Like Jesus. . . like church!”

- Lydia, like Jesus, had no troubled heart (John 14:17). Indeed we are told she had an open heart.
- Lydia, like Jesus, found that the “ruler of this age” now had “no power over me.” She received, in her baptism, the freedom to be God’s child.
- Lydia, from Jesus, was recruited for the new commandment of love. We only know of her immediate hospitality, but we may extrapolate a new obedience of life.

Try out these marks of the church embodied by Lydia:

- open heart, no troubled heart (among those so troubled by the ideology of the Right or of the Left)
- freedom, emancipated from the powers of this present age
- capable of the new obedience of love

All these gifts, we are told, arise from good preaching that comes from a vision beyond our control. The vision given to Paul leads to a new life for Lydia. The spirit of Jesus never “forbids” such newness, not even when we attempt to resist it (see vv. 6-7).