



Serving Others or Benefiting Ourselves? Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29 Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (May 22, 2022)

1. St. Pius, Cincinnati, OH – the challenges of having a building
 - a. Roof leaks
 - b. Stain glass mold
 - c. Heating and cooling
2. Shepherd of the Valley, Groton, MA – the freedom of not having a building
 - a. Pay per use: rent, utilities, cleaning
 - b. Off campus activities: Blessing of the Animals Barn service
3. Nativity – the beauty of having a building
 - a. A place for gathering protected from the harshness of nature
 - b. A sound-proof place for focused prayer
 - c. A gathering space for worship, religious instruction, fellowship, and ministry development

The early Church was a house-church. It was in the homes of newly converted people that the Church gathered for worship and for a meal together where they celebrated the Lord's Supper. Local leaders would carry on the instructions and encouragements received via letters by the founding apostles and to read the Hebrew Scriptures in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The Holy Meal and the tending of the poor was never to be neglected.

While local churches, mostly in Asia Minor, were kept together and organized by deacons, presbyters, and overseers (or bishops), the apostles were free to travel near and far to carry the message of salvation through Christ to all the nations.

Today's story from the book of Acts tells us of one of such travels. One night while asleep, Paul received a vision in which he was asked to preach the Good News in Macedonia, North of Greece. So, the following day, Paul and his companions made ready to go there.

But prior to receiving the vision, the book of Acts tells us that they attempted to go and preach the gospel in other parts of Asia Minor, but God said: "No way. It isn't my plan." In fact, Luke puts it this way:

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, *having been kept by the Holy Spirit* from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but *the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.* (Acts 16:6-7)

There are times when we encounter impediments and obstacles in our personal life and in our church life even when we plan and invest time, energy, and resources to accomplish a ministry we *think* is for God's greater glory. We get deflated and frustrated because what we had in mind never saw the light of day. But we don't easily associate impediments, challenges, and obstacles with God saying, "No. Not now. Not this way." We may want to make a right turn, but God says, "No, take a left here."

In those occasions, especially if our ego gets bruised and our bottom lip sticks out, we need to honestly ask ourselves if what we wanted to do was truly for God's sake or was intended to build ourselves up. Sometimes, even in our most ardent prayer, we think we are seeking God's will but in fact we are responding to our deepest fears and embellish that with holy thoughts and glorious words.

So, Paul and his companions get it. God has other plans. They renounce to pursue their own plans and instead cross over from Asia into Europe and the gospel is brought to other nations.

When we hit our head against a wall, we may want to remind ourselves that we are not in control. God's plans are not our plans. We cannot see beyond the reach of our noses. God's plans may not make sense to us in the moment and may totally contradict what we think we need to do to enhance the Kingdom. Our logic often does not work in God's vision. When we become aware of that that's a good time to exercise prudence and humility.

In those times, the challenge is to take a leap of faith. God is all around us doing what God does, creating new life. We may not see it. We just need to trust and commit fully to it in obedience and humility. We need to trust that God is with us all the way. God trusts us and equips us with what we need to face a new challenge or complete a new mission. When we pay attention to the ways of God, then it's not our needs that we try to respond to but the needs of the people around us. The unknown, the uncommon, the illogical may be scary. But just as Paul and his companions put their thoughts of what needed to be accomplished aside and followed God's lead so must we. We are sent to serve, not to be served. The focus of the mission, if it is to be from God, is always other-centered. We don't go to others for the purpose of drawing a benefit. So, the leading questions ought to always be: Are we serving others or ourselves? Are we responding to their needs or ours? Ultimately, are we listening to God or to our desires?

When we decide we need to get our act together and do ministry to attract people to fill the empty spots in our pews, is that what God wants or are we reacting on our worst fears? Whose needs are we responding to? Let's ponder about that.

Luke goes through the names of the towns they plan to travel. The itinerary might make us yawn, but ancient people's jaws would drop: Say what? You took a "straight course to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis"? Unheard of, given the unpredictable winds and waves. The clear hint is that God was in this, enabling Paul to arrive in record time! The implication is that the Spirit (the "wind"!) is engineering this.

Philippi was a "little Italy," a colony where Roman veterans had been resettled as part of the reward for battle. I wonder if they had something akin to Memorial Day, when they thought of their comrades who had fallen in the battles they had survived? Was there survivor's remorse? War is ugly; it leaves people scarred. There may be ongoing buried grief in the surviving warrior and his or her family.

So, Paul and his companions arrived at Philippi. On the Sabbath day, they joined other Jews for prayer by the river since there was no synagogue in Philippi. There, Luke tells us that they preached to the women. In the group there was a woman called Lydia, a wealthy merchant in the business of purple dyed clothes. She was a devout woman and “the Lord opened her heart to accept what Paul was saying.” (Acts 16:14) This is a good reminder that the gift of conversion is in the Lord’s hands, not ours.

Undoubtedly, Paul spoke of the great love of God and the mercy and grace that God has demonstrated for all the people. But most of all, Lydia must have heard from Paul the intent of God to reconcile the world to Godself through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As a parent who sorrows at the distance that there may exist with her children, God seeks out those who are lost, confused, and have a heavy heart.

Ernest Hemingway might have known that God is always ready to take the first step towards reconciliation. He described the difficulty that characterizes relationships between fathers and sons in his short story, *The Capital of the World*.

The story, set in Spain, revolves around a father and his teenage son, Paco. Paco was an extremely common name in the Spain of that time. With desires to become a matador and to escape his father’s control, Paco runs away to the capital of Spain, Madrid. His father, desperate to reconcile with his son, follows him to Madrid and puts an ad in a local newspaper with a simple phrase: “Dear Paco, meet me in front of the Madrid newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven. I love you.”

Hemingway then writes, “the next day at noon in front of the newspaper office there were 800 “Pacos” all seeking forgiveness.” The world is full of people in need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Lydia, a devout woman of means, had also influence over her whole household who, along with her, accepted the Lord and got baptized. This became the first nucleus of the church in Philippi. She must have had a strong personality accustomed to have it her way. Luke recalls that she invited the whole group of apostles to stay at her house and she did not accept a “No” for an answer. She understood the true meaning of the gift of baptism: once you have been touched by the forgiving grace of Christ, you dedicate your life to the Lord. You can’t stop giving thanks and offering yourself over and over again for the purpose of the kingdom.

The apostles could not reject Lydia’s offer. They could not be the only giver and Lydia the only receiver of grace. There is a mutuality in ministry. By virtue of our baptism, we are all called to praise, honor, and glorify God. It’s not only our duty but also our privilege. By giving thanks to God for all we have received and are, we are empowered to be who we are made to be and are on the journey to become fully human. What a great gift to have the opportunity to give back to God.

On top of that, God gives us the means, the skills, the tools, the energy, and the time to show gratitude. We all have something to give back to God. And if we really think about it, even if we had very little to give, that little is a gift of God.

I remember my parents giving me as a child a coin to put in the collection basket when the usher would come by during mass. That was their way to teach me generosity and stewardship of the gifts of God. They provided the coin just as God provides anything we are ready to give back.

But most of all, God provided the Spirit of Jesus to fill our hearts and equip us with what we need to serve and honor God. When we listen to the words of Jesus and keep them, he tells us in today's gospel, we show that we belong to him and are filled with God's presence.

Often, we say that God will come to us once we have put our house in order. But actually, John says at the beginning of his gospel (1:14) that God wants to pitch a tent in our midst and Jesus confirmed that God is in the construction business. In fact, he says: "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." Obviously, he admits, those who don't care about me will care less about my words.

But that's too bad, for God's house, which Jesus wants to prepare for us in us has the potential of having many rooms (John 14:2). God can build as big a house as we let him. Are we going to clear the ground for a small apartment, a townhome, a villa, or a castle?

Lydia received the word of salvation from Paul because she was already a follower of God. Her heart was enlarged with that Word and became inspired to open her house and offer her resources for God's greater glory. May we ready ourselves to receive the Spirit and serve our living God. Amen.