

Seeking God's Direction

Acts 16:9-15

5/8/2016

The youth picked the scriptures they each read. And they made wonderful choices, more wonderful than I think they realized at the time. I think they were familiar with the stories presented, but I don't think they knew the depth of what they choosing.

In the **Mary and Martha** story we are given two scenarios: doing or being. I think there are times when we need to do one over the other, but we have to be careful that we don't get out of balance. If we spend all our time distracted and worried it makes it very difficult to spend time with Jesus. And yet if we spend all our time in Bible study and prayer it can make it hard to get the necessary things of life completed.

For all of us, we can probably spend more time being with Jesus and less time doing the stuff of life. For Garrett and Elizabeth I would suggest you look for opportunities to study your Bible a bit more than the once or twice a month goal you set for yourselves, but that takes intentionality which means you have to make a commitment to make it happen. It's not easy to pick up your Bible and read it regularly – I bet if I took a poll not too many of us would score in the daily or even multi-times per week category.

Another contrast can be doing church or being church. Doing church is attending worship because we should and giving of our time in service out of a sense of duty. Being church is realizing worship really begins when we leave the sanctuary and live lives in which because we realize we are forgiven – we are willing to forgive others and we give of ourselves in service because we truly believe we are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Great scripture choice Elizabeth!

In the **Lazarus** story we hear about Mary and Martha again, as Lazarus is their brother – I don't know if you realized the connection between the stories Garrett. There are a couple of spiritual messages in this passage so let's unpack them.

We have this timeless and well known admission from Jesus of who he is and what it means for us who believe in him. Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." Then he asks the question, "Do you believe this?" That is a question that is posed to all of us – "do you believe this?" One we answer in our recitation of the Apostles Creed. Creed means statement of belief. So we will answer that question in just a few minutes, but it is a reminder of the good news we must be willing to share with others.

Then there is the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Even though Martha says to Jesus, "I know that God will give you whatever you ask" she doubts Jesus' ability and states "there will be a stench". Jesus replies with, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" We say we believe, but when confronted with what seems impossible we are quick to doubt.

Jesus prays to God and calls to Lazarus, "Come out!" This is the phrase that Garrett remembered and drew him to this story. Jesus call us to come out, to come out of our comfort zone, to come out of our complacency, to come out of doubt and believe that there is life, new life, different life in him. But we have to be willing to come out and embrace all that new life in Christ means. It could mean we need to change certain behaviors, it could mean we need to let go of old baggage, it could mean we need to open ourselves up to something outside of ourselves and give up our perceived notions that we control our lives and be willing to let the Holy Spirit work within us and through us.

When we join **Paul, Silas**, and Timothy in our reading from Acts, we are stepping into a mission that has already been underway for quite some while. Let me give you a little background.

Paul had started out with the intent of revisiting all the churches that he had helped establish in Asia Minor, in what is now Turkey, and on the way became acquainted with a faithful young man named Timothy. He brought Timothy along as he once again set out on a mission to reassure and strengthen the churches he had helped plant on his first missionary journey. According to the book of Acts, Paul had wanted to go to Phrygia and Galatia, also in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit forbade them from preaching

there. So, Paul redirected to Bithynia and Mysia, but once again the Holy Spirit forbade them to stop and preach there. Instead, they turned aside once more and journeyed to Troas, which was on the shore of the Aegean Sea, a very long way from Lystra and Derbe – about 450 miles!

While the Holy Spirit clearly said no about the plan Paul had established, we don't hear anything about the Holy Spirit clearly giving new directions. All we know is that Paul was certain the Holy Spirit forbade him to preach or teach in his first two chosen directions, so he took a different path. It reminds me of the Robert Frost poem "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." Paul did not follow the path he had taken before, the one he had planned to retrace. He turns from it at the Holy Spirit's direction and sets out on a new course. And, as we shall see, it makes a significant difference.

Once Paul and his fellow missionaries arrive in Troas, he receives a vision giving the party clear indication to travel to Macedonia. The author of Acts doesn't say that the vision was from the Holy Spirit, but Paul considers it powerful and trustworthy enough to immediately book passage for his entire group to Macedonia! Now, his journey is being directed to someplace, instead of merely being detoured from someplace. They sail directly to Samothrace, an island on the way to Neapolis, and once in Neapolis, they go by land straight to Philippi – a leading city of the time.

At that point, you might expect something big to take place. Paul and his colleagues are where God seems to want them to be. Yet what we hear is that they more or less cool their heels for a number of days. While they might have been preaching and teaching during that time, the person telling of their journey doesn't say more than a few words about that time, just that they stayed there "some days." Here, however, is where the story gets interesting.

Remember that Paul was commissioned by Christ to take the good news to the Gentiles. In spite of this, as a starting point he always sought out the community of Jews wherever he went. While in Philippi on the Sabbath, Paul and his group go outside the city to a place by the river where they expect people to be gathering to pray. This tells us some things. First, because it is the Sabbath, Paul must have expected these people to be Jews. Second, there probably were not enough Jewish men in Philippi to form a

synagogue, which required ten adult men to hold a service, or there would have been a building for gatherings to pray. Instead they went to the riverside. Third, Paul and his group were seeking out community. Fourth, they were seeking out an opportunity for prayer.

When they come across the gathering of women, Paul does not discount them and leave. Instead, he preaches and teaches, and God opens the heart of a prominent woman in the group named Lydia. She is described as “a worshiper of God,” which is Bible-language for a Jew by practice but not by birth. Lydia is so moved by what Paul shares that she is baptized, along with her household, and insists that the missionaries come stay with her.

So, let’s review. Paul wound up in Philippi because he responded to direction from the Holy Spirit and a vision from God, not because of his well-thought-out mission plan. After getting there, he waited for further direction and, when none seemed to come, he sought out a community of faith and prayer. As a result of seeking God’s direction, Lydia became the first convert in Europe and the start of the Christian church in Philippi, a church that becomes famous for its faithfulness!

How often, as we sit in council or committee meetings, do we ask the question, “What do we want to do?” or “What mission are we interested in pursuing?” or some other question that belies our need to control the mission of Christ’s church? How seldom do we approach our mission decisions with prayer instead of demographics or budgets? And when our well-laid plans don’t seem to produce results, how quick are we to get frustrated that God didn’t bring our ministry to bear fruit?

The story of Lydia’s conversion is interesting in many ways, but the power and significance of the story for all of us, I think, is in the reliance on God’s direction by Paul and his colleagues through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Pray with me: Lord God, we invite you to dwell in us and to so fill Garrett, Elizabeth, and us with your Holy Spirit that our ministry and mission are guided by your will and wisdom instead of ours. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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In this passage Jesus tells Martha that she is not focusing on the necessary thing – spending time listening to Jesus. May we all seek to read our own Bibles and spend time with God's Son.

Luke 10:38-42

Common English Bible:

While Jesus and his disciples were traveling, Jesus entered a village where a woman named Martha welcomed him as a guest. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his message. By contrast, Martha was preoccupied with getting everything ready for their meal. So Martha came to him and said, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to prepare the table all by myself? Tell her to help me." The Lord answered, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things. One thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the better part. It won't be taken away from her."

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In this story from John we learn about the death of Lazarus and how Jesus raises him and us to new life.

John 11, selected verses

New Revised Standard Version:

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them

about their brother. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Then Jesus came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go." Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

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In this passage Paul receives a vision from God and responds to the urging of the Holy Spirit to change his mission.

Acts 16:9-15
New Revised Standard Version

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[a] 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.