

Our text tells us that Paul, Silas, and Timothy are traveling throughout the provinces of Phrygia and Galatia. For context, this is modern day Turkey. Years earlier, Paul had established relationships, and eventually congregations in various towns and cities throughout the region. He's making a return trip to see friends, new and old, and to offer encouragement. The group had planned to make their way westward toward the province of Asia (also part of modern-day Turkey) for their next stage in the journey. And one would assume that from Asia, they would make their way across the Aegean Sea into Macedonia and Crete (modern-day Greece), and Rome, and even further into Europe. But for whatever reason, Paul has a vision – a man from Macedonia calls to him, and says, “Come across this great sea, we need your help!”

Paul and his friends divert their plans, and make preparations to go to Philippi, which is the leading city of Macedonia. But there's one more strange catch. “Don't go through Asia,” the Holy Spirit tells them. Go back up through Phrygia and Galatia, and around Asia, and then puddle-hop across the sea to Philippi.

This makes no sense! Asia is a coastal province, with lots of ports, and easy access to the sea, and a direct route to Macedonia. Going to Philippi via Phrygia and Galatia is like leaving our church parking lot and going to Wilmington, North Carolina via Huntington, West Virginia. (Though strangely, I bet that's something Tim Moore has done at least once. We'll have to ask him!!!). This is not a trip rooted in efficiency, but hey, what good gospel account ever is?!?

Now we know the *why* of Paul's journey. And we hear the tiring logistics of the trip – I am exhausted just reading about it. Ultimately, Paul and his friends find themselves in Philippi. This is a thriving city. It's

your prototypical Roman colony. The city was divided into square lots, and ultimately settled by Roman military veterans. Like any Roman outpost, it's Rome on a smaller scale. There is a forum, and a marketplace, and palatial offices, and temples, and I'm sure they had a Starbucks, and a Lowe's, and a Crate and Barrel, and whatever else credentials your sense of commerce. My point is, this city is busy, and maybe a little crowded, and its customs and traditions are surely strange and unfamiliar for Paul, and Silas, and Timothy. And like anybody else who has even been on an extended business trip, these three men rejoice when the weekend comes. TGIF! Let's take advantage of Sabbath.

"Let's go find something that's a little bit more....still, and quiet, and reverent," they say. They make their way past the city gates, and toward the river, and search out a spot that seems fitting for prayer and worship. They find a spot. They also find a group of women who are there for the same purpose.

I want to stop here for a moment.

During our Wednesday night gatherings, we've been thinking about the idea of stranger to neighbor. How might we engage people who are different from us in ways that start meaningful conversations, and help us to broaden our circle of community?

One of the topics we pondered was conversation starters. Why is that when we first meet someone, we always ask them, "Where are you from," and "What do you do?" None of us work for the census bureau. And it's not like where a person resides, or how they earn their living are indicative of their broader value, or even of their broader interest to us. At least not in theory. These are superficial questions. They are

also questions that both assume and expect a normative experience shared by question poser and question answerer.

The text tells us that the apostles met a woman among this group named Lydia. Where was she from? Thyatira. And what did she do? She was a dealer of purple cloth. If we were only interested in the census answer, that's the *where* and *what* of Lydia, we might never receive the fullness of this text.

"Hey honey, "How was your trip?"

"Yeah, it was fine. I sat next to some dude named Bob on the plane. He was from Charlotte, or maybe it was Charlottesville, I can't remember. Said something about being a pastor at a Baptist church, but not that-kind-of-Baptist church. I just put my headphones on after that."

But here's the thing. Paul didn't work for the census bureau. He was a whole lot more interested in the *who* and the *how* of those whom he met.

Lydia is from Thyatira. Did you know that Thyatira is a city in a province called Asia, the very province the Holy Spirit compelled Paul and his friends to avoid? Here's another fun fact. Thyatira wasn't on a major trade route, but it was famous for its purple and indigo dyes – people went wild for purple, and that purple generated massive amounts of wealth. And of additional interest to you might be this: Thyatira was situated as a main stop on a road that connected a city called Pergamos to another little city, one you might have heard of, called Sardis.

When Paul meets Lydia, he meets someone who knows what it's like to be a stranger in Philippi, to have traveled a great distance, to have

navigated the newness and unfamiliarity of this place, and to have searched for stillness along the bend of the river. Paul also meets one who finds joy, and abundance, and a sense of the divine in community. Paul finds one who has an open mind and heart, and an eagerness to ask questions.

Who is Lydia? She is stranger just like Paul, a kindred spirit. And how is it that she finds herself in this moment? She too seeks Sabbath, shared in the company of neighbors who used to be strangers.

And so it goes. Paul stops everything he is doing to seek out a man who needs his help in Macedonia, only to find a woman outside the gates of Philippi, from the very place he's been told to avoid, who is offering him her help and hospitality.

Let the census man or the revenuer be content with the *where* and *what*. Paul isn't. Paul uses the *where* and *what*, to inform the *who* and *how* of those whom he encounters.

Tell me Lydia, what were you feeling on your journey? Tell me Lydia, what was it like to learn a new language, and protocol, and city grid? Tell me Lydia, how was it that you carved out a sense of home in this place? Tell me Lydia, what is it that your heart needs right now, in this moment? Tell me Lydia, what is it about this very bend in the river that connects you to the sacred? What do you hear? And what do you see? I really want to know. And do you think that we could be friends?

Lydia, for her part, responds as authentically as she can. She and her household are baptized, and she offers Paul an invitation: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." Paul, Silas, and Timothy are persuaded.

Lydia is the first convert in Europe. She will serve as a deaconess in the Church at Philippi, the most beloved and connected of Paul's congregations. And even if Philippi is a strange city, Paul will never feel more at home than in the company of its congregation.

Community. Transformation. Relationships. Strength. Hope. Connectedness to God and neighbor. All of this happens because Paul chooses to ask questions of strangers that seek to reveal deeper meaning. Paul follows in the pattern of Jesus. Jesus went out of his way, all the way to Samaria, to ask the woman at the well about living water. Jesus reminds us of the Good Samaritan who acted as neighbor, even when it wasn't safe. Jesus had a way of creating impactful conversations, no matter how brief or random.

As I think about this morning's text, I wonder how much better our world would be, if we were intentional in asking the kinds of questions that help reveal who our neighbors are, and how they experience the world.

Last week, a young man walked into a supermarket. And I imagine he was filled with a sense of disillusionment; perhaps there was pain, and isolation, and alienation, and anxiousness, and he was tired with the world. And I suppose he was influenced by too many people concerned with where people are from – their zip code, their ethnicity, their race, their class, their categorized religion – and never caring about who they are. How I wish he would've asked the people in that store how they experienced the world; what they knew of pain, and anxiety, and grief, and joy, and love, and possibilities, and hope. I wish he would have asked who they were, because I believe he would have heard a shared

experience, and I think he might have even been offered an act of hospitality similar to the one Lydia offered Paul.

But he didn't. He chose to live in a world of where and what. He chose to discard life, to dehumanize it. And an entire community, indeed an entire world is shattered. And it never had to be.

If we are honest with ourselves, we spend the majority of our time seeking to know the who and how of the neighbors that are most like us. We'd don't go to Philippi via Phrygia and Galatia. We don't leave the busyness of the city for the stillness of the river. We don't let ourselves be persuaded to faith in the hospitality of strange women dressed in purple robes. And it's a shame. Because if we are ever gonna stop reading about hate crimes in Buffalo, or black and brown bodies trampled in Minnesota and Wisconsin, or baby formula shortages at border crossings, we're gonna have to leave the comfort of our living rooms and dining rooms, and follow the Spirit.

Sardis Baptist Church, the man from Macedonia is pleading for our help. When we see her, and realize that she's actually a woman from Thyatira, may we open ourselves to learning who she is. And in that newfound friendship, may we finally, finally forge a community, where all neighbors, together, may proclaim, "Rejoice in the Lord always! Again I say rejoice!"

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.

Who Are You?
Bob Stillerman
Sixth Sunday of Easter, 5/22/2022
Acts 16:9-15



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith