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The Acts of the Apostles
XIX. Come to Macedonia
Acts 16:1-10

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Right from the start we've got a bit of a conundrum. Last week, at the Jerusalem council, the issue of whether or not Gentile converts to Christ must first be circumcised was settled. Salvation, agreed the council, was by grace and grace alone – and not by grace plus something else, namely circumcision. The council then wrote a letter reporting this decision to the far-flung churches in Gentile lands. Paul, as we meet him this morning, is carrying a copy of this letter to the various churches he will encounter on this, his second missionary journey.¹

But here's the conundrum. In Lystra Paul comes across a devout young Christian by the name of Timothy. Timothy, though young – probably sixteen or so – has clearly greatly impressed the church leaders in Lystra and Iconium, and he greatly impresses Paul also when they meet. So much so that Paul wants Timothy to join him on his missionary journey. But, according to Paul, there is one matter that needs to be taken care of first – circumcision. Timothy must be circumcised. And there is our conundrum! Didn't this issue just get resolved at the Jerusalem council, that Gentile converts to Christ did not need to be circumcised? Was Paul himself not carrying a letter stating just that? So why in the world is Paul – the church's champion of salvation by grace alone – now insisting that Timothy has to be circumcised if he is to accompany him?

Let me try to give the short answer. It has two parts. Part one is that Paul is not willing to let anything get in the way of his proclamation of Christ. And part two is that Timothy's not being circumcised would indeed get in the way of Paul's evangelistic method. Let me explain that. When Paul entered a new town, the first thing he would do was set up his tent-making shop in the public marketplace. Remember, that was Paul's trade. And while doing business in the public marketplace, he would strike up conversations with customers and fellow tradespeople – making friends particularly with the Jewish members of that community. Often this would then result in Paul's being invited to stay in the home of a Jewish family – which would give him opportunity not only to talk about Jesus there, but would also secure him a hearing in the local synagogue. And from that foundation of new Jewish converts to Christ, Paul would then begin reaching out to the Gentiles in town – slowly building up friendships, and through those friendships bringing the Gentiles to hear the Good News of salvation in Jesus.

And because Timothy would have been considered Jewish, not Gentile, because of his maternal line, for him to be an uncircumcised Jewish convert to Christ would have been a big problem standing in the way of Paul and Timothy being welcomed by the Jewish community – Paul's initial inroad into proclaiming Christ in a new town. The discussion would have focused

on why Timothy was a Jew who was not circumcised – and not upon anything Paul wanted to say about Jesus. And – part one – because Paul was unwilling to allow anything to get in the way of his proclamation of Jesus, therefore Timothy needed to be circumcised so that that wouldn't be an issue. So, poor Timothy – Jerusalem council or not – the deed is done. And off they go.

But before we head out with them, I think it is worth pausing for a moment to think a little more about Paul's method of evangelism and what we might learn from it – for we, in our day, bear the same commission to bear witness to Jesus whenever and wherever we can. The problem for a lot of us, though – and perhaps especially for Presbyterians – is that when we think of evangelism, we think of Billy Graham preaching to a full stadium while the choir sings “Just As I Am” and the sinners come forward to be saved. And we know that there is just no way we could ever do that! Or, maybe worse, when we think of evangelism, we think of someone coming up to us and demanding, “*Are you saved?*” This happened to me in a drugstore in southwest Georgia, my last church. I was standing at the magazine rack while Anne was looking for something, when a woman came up to me and without so much as a “How do you do?” said to me, “*Are you saved?*” I was so taken aback that all I could think to say was, “*Well, I'm a Presbyterian pastor.*” She thought about that for a moment, and then said, “*Yeah? But are you saved?*” And if that is evangelism, then most of us, I suspect, don't want any part of it.

But look again at how Paul does evangelism, and I think we are being invited to think of a third way – one that doesn't require preaching to football stadiums, which we could not do; but also one that doesn't require us to accost strangers in the magazine aisle at Walgreens – which we don't want to do. Paul practiced a form of evangelism that we could call “Friendship Evangelism.” Yes, he sometimes gave sermons to large crowds – but the heart of Paul's evangelistic work involved forming friendships, building relationships. And then out of those friendships and relationships, finding moments when the Gospel could be shared in a gentle manner with those friends and acquaintances.

And that we can do! Even Presbyterians! Paul didn't so much witness by eloquently moving the masses. And Paul didn't so much witness by accosting strangers on the street. Paul witnessed by turning the masses into individual persons, and by changing strangers into friends. And then, as a friend, sharing with them the Good News. Study after study shows that people most often come to faith in Christ not through great preaching, but through genuine friendships with Christian persons. And that we can do – that we are called to do, for Christ and for our neighbors.

One little story to illustrate – the testimony of how one Christian came to faith. He was a graduate student at the time, traveling through Europe. A severe two-week illness had landed him in a hospital in a small town in Austria – which left him weak, low on funds, and stranded a good ways from his home base. He says he found himself alone, hungry, and just plain depressed – and this was in the day before cellphones could immediately connect him to someone who could help. He finally managed to cobble together enough for a train ticket to Vienna, where he hoped to regroup. And as he sat on a bench in that small town train station, head in his hands, weak and worried and worn out by it all, an elderly woman, whose job it was to sweep up the station, came up to him and gently asked if he was hungry. Before he could answer, she took her lunch from a brown paper bag and handed it to him. He writes:

I have never forgotten her – the warmth of her face, the graciousness of her gift . . . We talked for more than an hour about her life. It had not been easy . . . She had lost her husband and two sons in the Resistance to the Nazis. Only her daughter survived. But she was thankful she said, for many things . . . Finally I asked her why she offered me her lunch. She said simply . . . “Jesus is my Lord. God is good” . . . Her faith touched me.²

Evangelism, not as preaching to the masses, not as accosting strangers. Evangelism as making personal connections in which we can gently and kindly share the love of Christ with those who do not yet know that love. That we can do. That we, like Paul and Timothy, are called to do.

But, back to the story. Now circumcised, Timothy joins Paul and off they go. But where shall they go? Paul wants to go into Asia – which, in this context, means something different than what we think of as Asia. Look at the map in your insert – see the province of Asia there on the left-hand side of what we now call Turkey? Paul wants to head west from Lystra/Iconium towards Asia. But the Holy Spirit says no. So, plan B – they head north towards Bithynia, there on the northern coast of modern day Turkey. But again the Holy Spirit says no. So, at this point they don't really know where they are supposed to go, so they head towards the northwest, to the region of Mysia and the city of Troas. There, finally, the Holy Spirit gives direction to Paul and Timothy's wandering feet. Paul receives a vision in the night in which a man from Macedonia, just across the Thracian Sea, begs Paul to “*Come to Macedonia and help us.*” At last, direction from God is given – and Paul and Timothy head out.

But imagine yourself, for just a moment, in the minds of Paul and Timothy before this call to Macedonia finally comes – how all those false starts and wrong directions and just plain wandering around trying to figure out where in the world they were supposed to go next for Jesus must have felt. Do that, because I believe it is something we have all felt at one time or another – if we have been at all serious about trying to discern God's will for our lives. So much of the time in life it can feel like we are bumbling around in the dark. Or we think we've got the big plan for our lives all figured out – and then the door slams shut, the way forward becomes blocked, the plan falls apart. And there are just so many ways that this happens – not just the Holy Spirit telling us no, but life itself seeming to gang up on us: a sudden and serious health crisis, struggles at home, problems at work, world events and crises – you name it. And then we feel stuck, lost, confused, getting nowhere, going nowhere.

But look again at Paul and Timothy, no doubt frustrated as we get frustrated, no doubt feeling like they were getting nowhere the way we sometimes feel that sense of nowhere, no doubt lost as to what to do next. And yet they keep going, keep walking – keep trusting that God will, in His time, make the way clear before them. Macedonia!

Maybe I am reading too much into this small little piece of the story, but it seems to me that we can learn two very important things about the will of God in our lives through Paul and Timothy's journey across Turkey on the way, finally, to Greece. The first is something which Paul will later write, that in this life “*we walk by faith and not by sight.*”³ Which means that discerning and following the Will of God in our lives usually will be a matter of stepping out without a full

knowledge of where we are going and what will happen when we get there. Usually a matter of striding into tomorrow without a clear and precise blueprint of exactly what we are supposed to do next.

Rather, we walk by faith, says Paul – meaning that the central concern for us in relation to the Will of God is not so much the “where next” or the “what next,” but rather the “Who next,” the Who always – meaning our relationship with God. Walking by faith and not by sight means the will of God is not so much about knowing exactly what we are supposed to do and when and where to do it, as it is about being in close relationship with God, and about learning to trust in God come what may, and about deepening our lives in the clear instructions He has already given to us through His Word. To be in the Will of God, we walk by faith – which means trust more than it does knowledge, which means relationship far more than it means a blueprint – we walk by faith, and not by sight.

So even as Paul and Timothy cannot see where they are supposed to go next, when they seem to be wandering around in the dark, their trust in God does not waver. They keep on moving forward in faith, trusting that the Lord, in His time, will make the way clear. And that, in fact, the wandering itself is not wasted time, but is itself taken up into the Will of God for our lives – for if we knew in advance the full blueprint for our lives, how would we ever learn to trust in Him, to rely on faith in Him? To walk by faith, and not by sight?

Which leads to a second important thing we can learn about God’s Will from Paul and Timothy’s meandering journey to Macedonia. Namely, that as we seek to find God’s direction for our lives, even in those wandering parts of the journey, God is with us. God is with us through all of it – which means that even the worst moments of our journey are open to His grace, His love, His presence and peace finding us and breaking through to us. The Holy Spirit is with Paul and Timothy every step of the way – and so also with us. Which means that even when we feel lost, unsure of what lies ahead, God is not only with us in that darkness, but can bless us precisely there, can grow us precisely there, can even use us precisely there for His glory.

David Zahl, a pastor and the editor-in-chief of a wonderful Christian journal called The Mockingbird, tells of a family that recently spent five months in the hospital with a daughter in danger of dying from heart disease. He says that the daughter’s courage and faith affected so many in that hospital, along with the courage and faith of her family. She eventually recovered – praise God! And on the day they were leaving the hospital, the father stopped to thank the staff for all that they had done. But the head physician stopped him and said, “*No, I want to thank you. The presence of your family has transformed this hospital.*”

Zahl says that he spoke to the father after this ordeal and asked him how he and his family had handled themselves with so much grace during those truly awful weeks. And the father said, “*I suppose I have learned to stop asking why God allows problems and difficulties and to start asking what God’s plan is right in the middle of them.*” Meditating upon that brilliant and faithful answer, Zahl writes: “*That, my friends, is faith. To find God – or be found by God – in the middle of disaster is to encounter the crucified God. The God whose purpose is greater and more glorious than we can imagine.*”⁴

Paul and Timothy may be stumbling around in the dark for a while, trying to figure out where to go next – but they are doing so in the company of God. And that is what matters most when it comes to the Will of God in our lives – simply that we live our lives every day into the Divine Presence. And to know that He is blessing us, holding us, leading us – even when we cannot see it, but can only trust in it by faith.

G. Campbell Morgan, who was a well-known and well-loved British evangelist of the early part of the last century, offers us this commentary on Paul and Timothy’s journey – it’s in rather antique English, but the sentiments are entirely up to date:

Oh, to go, not where I may choose, even by my love of the Lord, but where I am driven by the Lord’s command. Circumstances of difficulty are opportunities for faith . . . Let us follow the gleam, though the darkness threaten to envelop. Let us be true to the inward monitor, and if in being true, suddenly illness prevent, and we cannot follow, then rest in the Lord in the darkness, and know that God’s shortest way to Troas may be athwart our inclinations and purposes. It is better to go to Troas with God, than anywhere else without Him.⁵

¹ Romans 15:1-35.

² Roy W. Fairchild, Finding Hope Again (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 136.

³ II Corinthians 5:7.

⁴ David Zahl, “Blessed Perplexity,” The Mockingbird, No. 24 (Winter, 2024), p. 142.

⁵ Quoted in Kenneth O. Gangel, Acts, Vol. 5 of the Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), pp. 269-270.