

Sermon Manuscript: Acts 16:11-15

Fulfill Your Mission in Life

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 2, 2021

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us. [NIV]

I have a confession to make. I'm a Star Trek nerd. But it's got to be the original series – you know, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock. There are a lot of phrases from the series that have stuck in my memory over the years. One of them is from the second Star Trek movie, *The Wrath of Khan*. As is typical, there is a threat against the good people of the Federation. Captain Kirk and the Enterprise are called upon to save the day. Kirk is called out of retirement and the Enterprise is almost obsolete. It's being used as a training ship and Spock is the instructor of the cadets. There's an exchange between Kirk and Spock where Kirk asks, "These cadets of yours, how good are they? How will they respond under real pressure?" Spock replies with the line I remember: "As with all living things, each according to his gifts." This is an important truth to remember when it comes to people. It is especially true for us Christians when we remember who it is that gives us all things. As followers of our risen Savior Jesus on "Resurrection Road," today we see how Jesus enables us to **FULFILL OUR MISSION IN LIFE**.

1. Serve Where the Lord Puts You

The Lord leads people to be in the right place at the right time. It was the Lord who brought Paul and Lydia together in the city of Philippi. The Lord brought Paul in response to what is called his "Macedonian Call" that is recorded in the verses just before this story. Paul and his companions were in the city of Troas which is mentioned at the beginning of our lesson. His plan was to continue mission work in northeastern Asia Minor or what is modern-day Turkey. But one night the Lord sent him a vision. In that vision he saw a man from Macedonia beckoning to him. The man said, "Come over and help us!" So the next morning as soon as Paul woke up he told his companions, "Drop everything! We are going to Macedonia!" What do you think Paul expected to find when he arrived there?

The other person that the Lord brought to the right place at the right time was a woman named Lydia. She also was from Asia Minor. Our lesson tells us that she was from the city of Thyatira. Thyatira was a well-known and important city. It was the center for the manufacture of purple dye and the cloth that was made from it. This dye was used to color the cloaks worn by high

Roman officials as well as parts of the uniforms of officers in the Roman army. The process for making the dye involved extracting secretions from tiny shellfish. Because of the rarity and the difficulty of the process, the purple cloth that resulted was highly valued. As a dealer in this cloth, Lydia was most likely a well-to-do woman. There is no mention of a husband so she may have been a widow. She was originally from Thyatira but was now living in Philippi. This was a city that provided a great market for her cloth. As we read in our lesson it was a Roman colony. As such, it was considered part of Italy itself. Most of the important citizens spoke Latin. Many were retired soldiers. They had a preference for purple cloth.

When Paul and his companions set out from Troas the Lord was literally the wind in your sails. He drove their ship straight to the port city of Neapolis. From there Paul and his group went straight to Philippi. As we read here it was the main city in the area and a Roman colony. He may have expected to find some Macedonian man there saying, "Boy, I'm glad you're here! Thank you for coming to help us!" But that's not what Paul found. When Paul arrived he discovered that there were so few Jewish people that Philippi had no synagogue. It was usually Paul's practice to go to the synagogue first. The way Luke describes their first days in Philippi, it seems like they mostly just hanging out. They learned the lay of the land and figured out what they were going to do. They ended up cooling their heels until Saturday, the Sabbath day.

Meanwhile, Lydia was going about her normal life. When Saturday came she went out to share the Sabbath with the Jewish believers in the area. She herself was a Gentile but also a believer in the true God of the Old Testament.

It was the Lord who put Paul and Lydia together that day. It was a quiet Saturday on the bank of a quiet river. I imagine it was a very park-like setting. What Paul brought was a message. What Lydia brought was a heart that Spirit was ready to open to faith in Jesus. The gospel of Jesus was shared. Faith was created through the Word of God and the Sacrament of Baptism. It was an unexpected meeting, but it was a most natural one. People sat down together and shared the message of Jesus. It was Christ's mission that was really being fulfilled here. Paul's mission was to share the good news. Lydia's mission by God's grace was to believe it and then act on it.

The take away here is to work in the place where the Lord has put us. The reason that I am a fan of Star Trek is because it is "escapist." That means that it tells a story that has far more action and is much more dramatic than the normal every-day life. It lets us escape from our humdrum existence. We can be tempted to wish that our Christian life was dramatic like that. This idea of Christian life is promoted quite commonly these days by people who seem to be mostly interested in selling books and videos. This form of "escapist" Christianity seeks some kind of special revelation or miraculous evidence in answer to prayer. We can be tempted to have an expectation of some strong emotion that we feel all the time so we know that our faith is real. When we try to witness to someone we look for a dramatic conversion like the defendant who gives a tearful confession on the witness stand in some television courtroom drama. This is an "escapist" idea of our Christian mission. Do we insist to "boldly go where no man has gone before" in our Christian life? Are we discontent in the life where the Lord has placed us? Is he not giving us enough dramatic signs to prove he's there? We don't see any of

this here with Paul and Lydia. They are just people calmly sitting down and talking about the Lord Jesus. This is the realistic picture our Christian mission.

It's the same thing that Jesus did. He worked in the field that was set before him. He told his disciples, *"I was sent only to the last sheep of Israel."* [Matthew 15:24] Jesus could've done anything but he stuck to the necessary mission. He could've been a miracle worker and a powerful earthly ruler. Instead he served in the place and in the way that he was needed. Day by day, week by week he lived a perfect life to fulfill God's law in our place. When the time came he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup would pass from him, but only at his Father's will. It was the Father's will that he would suffer and die – that he would drink the cup. This is what Jesus did. It was the mission where he placed himself. He did it to save you and me. By fulfilling his mission in life, in death and in life again he has forgiven all of our sins including forgiving our immature discontent with the life in the place where he has put us.

We fulfill our mission in life by serving in the place the Lord has given us. This is called the doctrine of "vocation." Vocation means calling. We are called to a place and a time in our lives. We are to work there faithfully serving God and each other. Paul was called to be a missionary. Lydia was called to be a businesswoman. Where has the Lord placed you? Are you a parent or child? A boss or a worker? Are you a big wheel by the world standards, or small change? Is your life out in public or mostly private? The Lord has placed us in a family, among friends, next to a neighbor, out in public interacting with many different people. In all of this the Lord calls on us to faithfully serve where he is put you and me. We are to be his witnesses and to give him glory where we fulfill our mission in life, our calling.

2. Use the Gifts the Lord Gives You

The Lord has put us each in our unique place where he has a mission for us to fulfill. He has also given us just the right gift for that place to accomplish our mission. God brought the perfect gifts to the table on the riverbank outside of the city of Philippi. Paul had been given many gifts by God. He was gifted as a preacher and teacher. He had great learning and knew the Old Testament inside and out. He was a graduate of the top school of the Pharisees in the world. More importantly he had personally witnessed Jesus after he had risen from the dead. Remember how Jesus knocked him down on the road to Damascus and made him his apostle to the Gentiles that day. The most important gift that Paul brought was the gospel message about Jesus himself. He was able to tell Lydia and the others who were there that day how Jesus is our Savior.

Lydia also brought gifts that the Lord had given her that day. She brought a heart that would be filled with faith when she believed Paul's message by the power of the Holy Spirit. She also brought her great success in business. Her resources would provide support for Paul and his companions. Her home would provide a base for his work there in the city of Philippi. We read how she encourages them to stay there. She also would serve as a source of encouragement for Paul and the others because their proclamation to her was successful and she became a believer in Jesus. She also brought an entire household. Not just children but a large household that most likely also included servants. They also heard the message about Jesus, were baptized

and believed. The source of all of these gifts that were brought by Lydia and Paul is the Lord Jesus himself. Be sure to see that each believer was given different gifts to contribute.

This is true throughout the Church of Christ. The Lord blesses his believers everywhere with the gifts that are needed to accomplish his mission. We are all united as believers and share in common the gifts that come from faith. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: *There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is overall and through all in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. [Ephesians 4:4-7]* We all share the same evidence of faith, the fruit that springs from Jesus who is our Vine. In Galatians we read: *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. [Galatians 5:22-23]*

We share these gifts in common but each of us has also been given a unique set of gifts and abilities to be used in fulfilling our mission. Peter wrote: *Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, you should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever. [1 Peter 4:10-11]* Paul's gifts were different from Lydia's. Your gifts are different from mine. We all work together in the Lord's Church using the various gifts he has given to each of us. We are uniquely gifted for what the Lord wants us to do.

We don't need to be envious of someone else's gifts. We might be tempted to look at our fellow Christian and see all of the wonderful things that they are doing and wish that we could be like them. They might do something that seems very impressive. While surely God is served by that, isn't he also served by the day to day and week to week example that you give at home to your children? Is a bold public witness by someone more valuable than the person who earnestly goes inside their closet and prays "Your kingdom come" – the prayer that more and more would come to believe and be saved? We should never feel bad that we don't have the same gifts as someone else has. Isn't that ultimately an act of ingratitude for the gifts that God gives?

The Lord Jesus equips you to accomplish HIS mission in life. He's made you his own through faith in him as your risen Savior. He's given you reason to serve him with a whole life, the life that he has purchased with his precious blood. And he has put you in exactly the right place at exactly the right time. He has given you just the right gifts to accomplish the purposes he has in mind for your life. Show gratitude for his goodness. See the opportunities all around you where you might fulfill your mission. Don't underestimate the gifts that you have or think that they are unimportant. Instead gladly get to work on the mission the Lord has given you.

It's as the hymn we sang says: Let none here you idly saying, "There is nothing I can do."... Take the task he gives you gladly, let his work your pleasure be; answer quickly when he calls you, "Here am I, send me, send me!" [TLH 496:4] Amen.