

Sixth Sunday of Easter
Year C

Acts 16:9-15
Psalm 67
Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5
John 14:23-29

There have been many times in my life where I have stopped to consider how I got to where I was. I would look back and retrace my steps in my mind - looking at the various decisions I had made and trying to decide what that might have said about my thought processes. Looking at how God moves in our lives and how God might have influenced our decision-making can be enlightening.

Looking at Paul's ministry in this same way can be very illuminating. The episode related in our first reading today is a case in point. How did Paul end up talking with a woman by the river outside the city of Philippi? What led him to this encounter? To really understand how God directed Paul's efforts, we need to go back to the end of the previous chapter.

In chapter 15 of the book of the Acts of the Apostles, we are told the story of the first council of the church in Jerusalem. It was at this council that the leadership of the church acknowledged Paul's ministry to the gentiles and sent a letter to those believers. While working in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas had a falling out and went their separate ways in ministry. For his part, Paul revisited some of the churches in Syria and along the coast of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). However, he felt constrained by the Holy Spirit when he wanted to go further northeast, deeper into Asia along the Black Sea. Therefore, he turned westerly and continued to the Mediterranean coast at Troas. There he had his vision of the man calling him over to Macedonia.

Not only was Macedonia the homeland of Alexander the Great, it was the first region of Europe one would enter from the east. Philippi had been founded by Alexander's father, but in the centuries that had passed, the city had declined until the Romans made it their leading city for the northern part of Greece. Thus, in this very metropolitan city, Paul made his way on the Sabbath to the place he thought believers might gather for prayer. Here, he encountered a group of women whom he sat down to teach.

Thus, because the Holy Spirit blocked his way from going deeper into Asia, Paul was led by a vision to cross over into Europe and begin one of the most fruitful portions of his ministry. It was in Philippi that Paul really began his work with the gentiles. And it was this chance encounter with the women of Philippi that paved the way. How? Because one of these women, Lydia, not only provided a place for Paul to stay, but helped finance his ministry going forward.

Much has been made of the role of women in the church. From that very first encounter Jesus had after the resurrection with Mary Magdalene on, women have been vital in the church. Actually, even during His earthly ministry, Jesus was supported by women. It is no wonder, then, that Paul's ministry is also dependent upon women. But, who was this Lydia?

Although there are only a couple of verses dedicated to her, we can glean much about Lydia in these few words. First, she was a gentile woman who believed in the God of Israel - a worshiper of God. She was from the nearby town of Thyatira and, through her business, dealt with the elite of society, those who had the privilege of wearing purple. The fact that she had her own business and was the head of her household in a male-dominated society speaks highly of her. But most importantly, God opened her heart to hear the message Paul had.

Lydia provides an example for us today. As much has been made of Paul listening to the Holy Spirit's direction for his ministry, even more did Lydia listen to God and respond. Without willing people, especially women, the church across the centuries would be starved of resources, both financial and talent. Like Mary and Martha, Lydia became part of the backbone of the church in her area. We can learn much from such dedication.

As we look back on our path that led us here today, we can frequently see those times when God has guided us in the path we should go. We will see that it is not fortune or luck that brought us here, but the Holy Spirit directing us on our way. Where is God leading us from here?