

The 6th Sunday of Easter, Holy Trinity Church: May 22, 2022

Acts 16:9-15

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

Once again, I want to ask you a question this Evening/morning: how do you respond when God or life itself changes your plans? This question is relevant for everyone in the church because at some point in your life, God or life, if you will, will suddenly and unexpectedly change your plans for your day, maybe even for your life.

There is an old “Peanuts” cartoon strip that I suspect we all can relate to. In the first panel Charlie Brown says, “I learned something in school today, I signed up for folk guitar, computer programming, stained glass art, shoemaking and a natural foods workshop.” In the second panel he says, “Instead, I got spelling, history, arithmetic, and two study periods.”

In the third panel Charlie Browns asks Lucy, “So, what did you learn?”

Charlie Brown says, “I learned that what you sign up for and what you get are two very different things.”

Yes indeed, my sisters and brothers in Christ, welcome to life, Charlie Brown! What you sign up for and what you get are often two very different things. So how do you respond to unexpected disappointments? To a sudden change in your plans? How you respond will, in large part, depend on your trust in God and your commitment to place your life in God’s hands, to let God use you for His work.

Last week was a very busy week, full of meetings and administrative paperwork, sermon-writing this week and visiting parishioners in the hospital. As I was driving from one meeting to the next. However, I felt the strong urge to stop by St. Anne’s Hospital to give the Last Rites of the Church to our dear, Priscilla Lawton. The next day, Priscilla was called home to the Lord. I just knew that Priscilla needed these prayers.

Understand, God couldn’t have picked a less convenient time to lay this burden on my heart! I was in a hurry! I had a full schedule. It is when these times when God interrupts my day with such a vague calling? However, despite my questions and misgivings, I felt God’s tug. I pulled into the hospital parking lot and went inside. I asked the woman at the reception desk gave me

Priscilla's room number 22004. A man sitting nearby in the lobby heard my voice and I approached him. The man was a janitor at the hospital. That morning, he cleaned room 22004. He prayed, God send that priest, I want You God to send that priest to her room to pray for her. It might seem like an absurd request to many of us, but that was his prayer. The janitor's shift was ending soon, but he waited in the doorway praying and listening to the prayers of the Last Rites of the Church.

So, what about you? What about when God changes your plans for the rest of your life? If you ever questioned God's will for your life, if you've ever thought that your life just took an unexpected detour, then you can appreciate this story from Acts 16. Paul and Silas and Timothy discovered that sometimes God's will look like an unexpected detour or a closed door. The Holy Spirit often guides as much by the *closing* of doors as God does by the *opening* of doors." And how we respond to these unexpected moments, those closed or opened doors, says a lot about our belief in God, and it says a lot about how God can use us to accomplish His will.

When we face a difficult situation or a closed door, do not ask God, "Why?" It doesn't do any good to ask why? Instead, ask God, just ask God, what are you

trying to teach me through this, Lord?” Certain things we must trust to faith. We must leave them in God’s hands and trust God’s goodness.

God’s ways are higher than our ways, and God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts. If you are waiting around for God to answer that question, “Why?” you can end up bitter and find yourself withdrawing from God. But if you change the question to “What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?” Then, you remain open to God’s will and to God working in and through you. So, this is the question I have learned to ask, “What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?” I know that God is still working in every circumstance, no matter how strange or painful it may seem at the moment.

And that brings me to the central question of this scripture from the Acts of the Apostles today: Do you expect God to do something important with your life? Do you believe God has a purpose for you? That most Christians suffer from a “poverty of expectation.” Think about that phrase for a moment: “a poverty of expectation.” We don’t expect God to do anything important in and through our lives. We think that God uses other people, smarter people, holier people, more talented people, to do His work. But not us. God isn’t going to work in and through us to change lives and bring people to salvation in Jesus Christ. One quote from the Acts of the Apostles that really challenges

me reads like this, “Our chronic weakness is not that we expect too much from God, but that we trust Him for too little.”

St. Paul and his companions did not suffer from a poverty of expectation.

They trusted that God would act through them wherever they were. So, when

Paul dreamed of a man from Macedonia begging for help, he and his

companions headed straight in that direction. They ended up in the city of

Philippi. And they set out to find a group of Jewish men to share Jesus’

message with. And once again, God changed their plans. Paul and his men,

instead, came across a small group of women gathered by a river, praying.

Was this *really* God’s big mission opportunity for them? After all women

ranked low in power and standing in the society of that day. However, that’s

no problem for God as we have often seen. God works through all kinds of

people in all kinds of circumstances.

Think about that for a moment. What barriers do we place between God and

the people around us? What limits do we place on God’s work? Paul and his

companions were committed to preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, to

Jewish men. Did God really divert them from their grand missionary journey

so that they could preach to a group of women? At least one of the women, a

woman named Lydia, was even a Gentile. Was this unexpected, and maybe

uncomfortable situation really an opportunity from God? Evidently, Paul and Silas and Timothy thought so. They sat down and began to speak to the women. And the Lord opened the heart of Lydia; she and her entire household were baptized that day. But that's not the end of the story.

And those leaders caught a vision of what God could do in and through them if they threw away their barriers and limitations and welcomed these young people without reservation to their church. Lydia and the women attracted more and more people, and their congregation grew in vitality and spiritual maturity. All because they committed to removing any barriers that might keep people from hearing and receiving the word of God.

And that brings me to the final question for this evening/morning, will you obey God's calling whether you understand it or not? Remember that you are God's partner in the healing and salvation of the world. You are God's partner in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite texts of Scripture is 2 Corinthians 5:19-20, "... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation." Listen carefully, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were

making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

You see, my sisters and brothers, God can't do much with a life that isn't committed to Him. God can't do much with believers who don't see every moment of their lives as an opportunity to do the work of Jesus in all circumstances. This is a thought-provoking quote, "Those who put everything in God's hands eventually, see God's hand in everything."

That's what Paul and his companions did, they put everything in God's hands and they saw God's hand in everything. So, let's finish our Act of the Apostles lesson for today. Lydia and her entire household were baptized that day, and they invited the men to stay at her house. Lydia started a small Christian church in her home. Lydia's home was the first Christian church in the Western world. And, it was from this small outpost in Philippi that the message of Jesus spread throughout Europe, and eventually to the Americas, and, eventually, to all of us today. It's truly amazing what God can do with just a few committed men and women.

Here is the challenge for you doing in the 6th week of Easter and let me close with a story of what can happen when we follow God's leading to an unexpected place and an unexpected opportunity. Fr. Peter Quinn was a

young Roman Catholic priest, and friend of mine, many years ago, when God and the Bishop of Boston called him to his first church, St. Catherine of Siena Church, his new congregation into a rough town around Bunker Hill, in Charlestown, Boston. Peter thought there had been a mistake. Fr. Peter didn't think he would fit in with the 'Irish Townies'. The Townies were a rough group. At that time, the community around his church had much poverty, crime, alcoholism and many needs. But Peter resolved that, with God's help, he would give his very best to this challenging situation. Then, church began an afterschool program for children to keep them off the streets. They began ministries to men in prison and those battling addictions. Peter opened the rectory and invited some of these men to live with him temporarily to give them a fresh start in life.

Fr. Peter recalls how unsure and unprepared he felt in his early years at that church. He said, "In the beginning, there were so many times I wanted to quit. I would pray, 'Lord, you've made a big mistake.'" But, Peter stayed where God had led him and waited for answer. And one day that answer walked through his office door. His name was Ike, and he was ten years old. Ike came up and asked, "Fr. Peter, how long you gonna be here?" Fr. Peter was honest with the boy. He said he really didn't know. Then Ike wrapped his arms around the priest's neck and said, "Don't go anywhere. If you're here, I'm

going to make it.” Fr. Peter said that in that moment, he knew that God’s answer to his prayer was both “Yes” and “No”: “No, I didn’t make a mistake, and, yes, I could do it.”

God does His greatest work through ordinary people like you and me. If we really believe that, we will live in constant hope and expectation and joy. God places His greatest opportunities right in front of us, in the ordinary circumstances of our daily lives. So, what about you? So, what will you do? What will you expect God to act through you? AMEN!