

May 26, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Acts 16: 13-15  
“Fresh Expressions”



Humans settled in the Philippi area thousands of years before modern ear, but about 360 years before the first century, the Philippi that Paul visited formed. Two large rivers irrigated the fertile soil. Proximity to mountains, rich in minerals and close to seaports, made it an excellent site to grow wealth and trade. Of course, the Roman Empire also found it favorable. Antony and Octavian fought with Brutus and Cassius in Philippi. Then Roman colonists and veteran soldiers added to the city's mass. Roman citizens acquired rights. The Via Egnatia ran through town. It was the large military road spanning the coasts - almost 700 miles long, 20 feet wide, paved with stone slabs and marble. This roadway brought Roman soldiers to her colonies, but also tradesmen and immigrants which made for an interesting community - many religions coexisted in the flourishing economy; diverse populations and varying social customs mingled.

Paul's journeys took him to cities throughout the expanded Roman Empire. When he arrived in a new city, he went first to the synagogue; that was where he would find his target audience. Those who worshipped the Roman gods or the Greek gods or the many other deities were not easily won over. He approached his own people; those who worshipped the God of Israel. To them he told of their Messiah of the house of David. Some listened. Within the Jewish synagogues he would find another group, those who were not Jewish, but those who had given up on the pantheon of gods and were accepting of Jewish monotheism, family ethics and communal values. These 'God worshippers' or "God fearing" Gentiles were Paul's greatest converts. He arrived in Philippi and found the shops, palestra, communal baths, temples to the Roman and Greek divinities, market and civic square, the acropolis and the amphitheater capable of seating thousands. Magnificent constructions of stone and marble rose in Philippi, but no Jewish synagogue existed. Evidently there was not the quorum of ten Jewish men in all of the populated city- not enough to congregate by Jewish rule. Several days after his arrival, after he has explored the town, it is sabbath. Paul leaves the city gates and walks down to the river bank for there was a place of prayer. Where the river ran clear, babbling over rocks and the trees, shaded the banks and the breeze gently cooling, he found women gathered.

The leader of the group was easy to spot. Knowing nothing about her, Paul knew nonetheless in an instant who had gathered the women. A purple scarf fluttering near her face told her story.

Purple dye came from a sea snail. The process of making the dye was long, difficult and expensive; only the wealthy could afford it. Thousands of the tiny snails had to be found at the shore's edge, their shells cracked open, the snail removed. From each of the thousands of snails, a tiny gland was removed and the juice extracted and put in a basin,

which was placed in the sunlight. There a remarkable transformation took place. In the sunlight the juice turned white, then yellow-green, then green, then violet, then a red which turned darker and darker. The process had to be stopped at exactly the right time to obtain the desired color of purple. It was delicate process. It took twelve thousand snails to create 1.4 ounces of dye, which was enough to color a handkerchief. No peasant, no commoner, no average person wore purple; someone in royal purple was royal- or close to it.

Outside the city gate, beside a small river on the southern edge of town, an informal setting allowed rabbi Paul to sit with the Gentile women gathered there in the cool of sabbath rest. Her name was Lydia, Greek, not Jewish. She is named after an ancient city well known for the fabrics she sells. She sells not just any fabrics, but she was “a dealer of the purple cloth.” She owns her own business; she owns her own home. She is self-sufficient, successful businesswoman whose clients were the rich and famous, well-to-do. She had entry to important places and important people of social prominence. She too was on a journey, somewhat like Paul. She’s left the comfort of her home to come outside the city gates and gather on the river bank with other women seeking that which they did not find in Philippi. Her spiritual hunger opened her heart to listen eagerly to this stranger’s words tell of a man named Jesus who offered a way of living in peace, compassion and unity with all. These women were the first people in the whole of Europe to hear Paul’s teachings. Paul explained about other people who were dedicating their lives to following the way of Jesus and worship the God of All. Lydia’s heart was warmed; she had found her way. Lydia became a follower of the Way of Jesus and the other members of her household too. Through her hospitality, Paul became a guest in her home in Philippi. Her home became the spiritual center for brothers and sisters choosing to follow the Way of Jesus in all of Philippi. When Paul departed, Lydia naturally became the spiritual leader. Her home was within the city. Her hospitality made space for the ecclesia - fellowship of believers.

The ecclesia - the kinonia - the followers of Jesus began not with Cathedrals and magnificent sanctuary such as this one. They gathered where the people naturally gathered. By a river bank in the cool of the evening, in a home, on a grassy hillside. They gathered in secret when necessary; they gathered to pray together, to learn together, to find community with others who were searching for something more. These early gatherings shared food with one another and cared for those in need among them. They listened together for God’s whisper and opened their hearts to be changed. They vowed to follow a message that challenged the conventions of society. They learned about liberation and justice where gender or money or social status did not divide. There were no particular creeds or doctrines or dogmas. At first, there were not even any scriptures. Certainly, no rules other than Love One Another. Just people gathering in love and worship and service trying to follow the way to unity that Jesus lived and taught. That was

the foundation which became the Christian church. The fundamentals of the original Christian church was simple: follow Jesus.

The term "fundamentalism" as used today is very different. It has roots in the Niagara Bible Conference (1878–1897), which defined those tenets it considered fundamental to Christian belief. Often we might hear the call to “return to the fundamentals” of Christianity. I agree. I think we should. The fundamentals being listening, loving and serving.

In 2004, the Church of England and the British Methodist Church launched a new adventure beginning a process of investing and encouraging new forms of church expression. “These fresh expressions weren’t simply a fad or an attempt to be cool but looked to address a rapidly changing culture in the UK and a change in attitude to attending church and to a spiritual life. a Fresh Expression is a form of church for our changing culture established primarily for the benefit if people who are not yet members of any church. Fresh Expression is making of ‘church’ in the world where people naturally gather.

Taking the church to the people, out to the field or down to the dock or in hospitals or neighborhoods was exactly what John Wesley did in 1700s that got him into trouble with the Church of England. It is rather ironic that several hundred years later they are embracing it and callout it a fresh new idea!

A group of people gathered outside the gates of the city, down by a riverside in the cool of the evening seeking something more .... hmm, wonder where that idea came from?

Fresh Expressions are forms of the church being the church that started this whole Christian tradition. Paul knew all about fresh expressions of community. We are invited to ponder how we too can return to that fundamental form of faith community.

You are invited to ponder and pray about where there are gatherings of people today. Think of those places you gather around a shared interest like arts, books, cooking, academia. Think of those places you share in an activity lie a game, sport, cycle, music group. Perhaps you have a group around a shared experience like parenting, retirement, or an illness. What groups align you with others geographically like your neighborhood, apartment complex, or retirement residence?

You are invited to begin by 1. listening or God’s Spirit and listening for others in your social groups. Then ponder what 2. loving and serving this community might look like. Is there a way to 3. build community? Finally, 4. explore what it means to follow teachings of Jesus together—in love, compassion, justice. For when you do these things, you are the church.

Where might you be a “worshiper of God” in the world? Where might your hospitality create ‘church’ - as a fresh expression of spiritual presence in today’s world?

Amen. May it be so.