

Down by the Riverside
A sermon by Angie Witmer
Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ
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As it was down by the riverside where Paul and Lydia's lives were changed in today's story, it seems only right to open up the sermon with this song:

Gonna lay down my burdens down by the riverside

Down by the riverside, down by the riverside

Gonna lay down my burdens down by the riverside

And study war no more...

Study war no more. That seems to be the key to a lot of the stories of this book. Actually, that seems to be the key to a lot of the stories of our lives. If we could just figure out how to study war no more...and not just the war that happens between countries but the wars that happen within and without of ourselves—how we treat ourselves and one another...well...maybe then this place would look a little more like the kingdom of God.

I think that Paul and Lydia might have something to tell us about how to get it done.

I'll start with Paul. Actually, I'm going to back up a few chapters in this story to the a time when Paul was known as Saul. Saul was fairly famous back in the day for being the go-to guy for persecuting the Jesus freaks. He could shut them up faster than anybody. He'd made a name for himself. Probably a little money, too. At the rate he was going, he'd be able to retire early, maybe write a book or pick up some speaking gigs to share the tools of the trade, and live out the rest of his days in style.

But something happened. In short, Saul was side swiped. Knocked up side the head. Thrown off his feet. Had his eyes opened. And everything changed. He had to admit that the fame and fortune weren't all they were cracked up to be and he knew that he couldn't keep doing what he'd been doing, so he changed his name to Paul and used his gifts and talents to share the good news of Jesus Christ. He built relationships and started churches and wound up being a rock star in the Jesus movement. Go figure.

Anyway, Paul quickly discovered that just because he decided to leave behind his wicked ways didn't necessary mean that life would be all sugar and spice and everything nice. Enthusiasm and passion will only get you so far—there were still people out there who didn't want to hear this good news let alone embrace it and live accordingly. So time and again, Paul was threatened,

thrown in jail, accused of all kinds of things, and even caught in the middle of a good church fight or two. Hey—nobody said it was going to be easy.

But he didn't give up. In his heart of hearts, Paul believed that what Jesus said and did and taught and preached really was the way God created us to live. Fully. Whole. Real. That awareness changed Paul—it made his life more full and whole and real. And if it somebody like him could be transformed, then maybe others could, too. And if other people were changed, then who knows? Maybe whole communities could be changed. And if whole communities could be changed...well, then. The whole world could be more full and loving and whole and real. It starts with one person. So Paul kept going.

In the verses that immediately precede today's story, we learn that Paul has had some success in starting the message out to folks and starting up some new churches. He's had so much success, in fact, that he designed a master plan of what to do next based on what he'd done in the past. He mapped out a whole new territory, came up with an itinerary, probably lined up a contact or two...and then things fall apart. The story doesn't say what, exactly, happened: maybe Paul got sick at the last minute or his donkey fell and broke it's leg. All we know is that the Spirit of Jesus prevented him from going where he wanted to go. Talk about frustrating. After all he's been through...now this? Geez.

And then he gets the vision. That's where today's story begins. A man of Macedonia appears to Paul in a vision, begging for help. That's it. That's all Paul gets. A guy. A plea. Huh. He'd never thought about Macedonia before. Or anywhere in Europe for that matter. After all, no one had taken Jesus' message to that part of the world. That would be crazy. The culture, the people, the travel—oh, the travel: he'd have to leave from Troas and go through Samothrace then to Neapolis before reaching Phillipi. Not exactly a quick or easy trip. And besides...he had this other plan all worked out. It was darn new fail-proof. Much easier. Much closer to home. A route that would let him start new churches and keep an eye on the ones he had already started. That was a much more do-able plan.

So here he is, faced with a dilemma: does he stick with the practical and known? Or does he take a chance and go with the vision?

He goes with the vision, of course, and packs his bags for Macedonia. And because Paul was willing to step out of his comfort zone, out into the unknown without knowing where any of this would end up or what it might mean, he ended up down by the riverside on the Sabbath. It was there that he met Lydia. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Lydia. Oh, Lydia. Have you seen Lydia? She was something else. She had made it, you know. She was one of those people—people who do things that they say can never be done. From this snippet of a story, we can assume that she ran a successful business—people who sell purple cloth are the best of the best selling to the rich and famous. We can also assume, then, that she had power and prestige and maybe even a little money, too. She had a household to run after all. She had shown them all. She could do it. Life was good.

And then she ran into this guy Paul down by the riverside at her regular old Sabbath day prayer meeting. It was a pretty ordinary event on a pretty ordinary day—or so she thought. The story doesn't tell us what Paul said to her, but whatever it was it certainly struck a chord. As soon as she heard his story, her heart was opened and she knew (just as Paul knew so long ago after his eye-opening experience) that there was something more to life than the recognition and reputation and stuff she'd fought so hard to earn. She knew she had to do something in response to this amazing message, so she did the only thing she knew to do: she listened to her heart and listened to God and took a chance. She took Paul and his companions home with her and had her whole household baptized. Not just her, but everybody in the house. And then, as if being baptized wasn't enough, she begged Paul and his group to use her house as home base. Whatever they needed for as long as they needed it—as long as they were in the area, her house was theirs. That's what I call radical hospitality—but that's not all. She also opened her home to the community and invited in others to hear the story, build relationships and grow in faith together. Regardless of what the neighbors might think, or what people might say behind her back, Lydia started the first house church in Europe. Bet she didn't plan on doing that when she got out of bed that morning. Life's funny, isn't it?

What makes this story so rich and amazing and real is that this kind of thing still happens all the time. Every day. To all of us. Things happen. Things that we perceive to be good things. Things that we perceive to be bad things. Things that knock us upside the head and take our breath away and make us cuss like a sailor or offer up a sigh too deep for words. And in all of those things, we are asked—just like Paul was and Lydia was and countless others have been throughout the ages—to stop and listen and open ourselves up to the possibility that maybe these aren't just random events. That maybe—just maybe—every moment of our lives is an opportunity to pay attention to that still, small voice of God so that we might know in our hearts and our minds and our bellies what we are to do next.

Because God really is still speaking, you know. It's true. God didn't just speak to people back in Bible times. God is still speaking. These are Biblical times. We are writing the story of God here and now. Through what might on the surface seem to be coincidences or through people who might appear to be strangers, God is speaking and inviting and calling us to turn our lives around like Paul did and use our gifts like Lydia did. Every day, God is asking us to simply be the amazing, gifted, holy people that we are so that others might come to know this powerful, life-changing, story so that our hearts might be opened and so that their hearts might be opened and so the world might be changed ... one person at a time, starting with me and starting with you right here and right now.

All we have to do is pay attention. Listen. Lay our burdens down. And study war no more. For the sake of the gospel. For the sake of all of us. If somebody like Paul can do it and somebody like Lydia can do it, then people like us can do it, too. And that is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.