

“Open Heart”  
Acts 16:9-15

There is an old joke about Presbyterians. It goes something like this. What happens when you cross a Presbyterian and a Jehovah Witness? Someone who knocks on the door, but when the people open the door they say nothing. As Presbyterians we are not known for our mission zeal in terms of sharing our faith verbally with others. The word subtle comes to mind when thinking of Presbyterians. Our churches are subtle; our people are subtle; our music is subtle (Ann excluded), our worship is subtle, and our movement is subtle. I have met many who have incredibly deep faith, but I have not met many Presbyterians who are very comfortable talking about their faith. There are many reasons for this, but at the forefront for most of us is the negative association we have had in our culture with people sharing their faith. Often times, evangelism has meant convincing someone that their way of life, thinking or faith is wrong and that they needed to believe like we do. And the typical threat that comes with that is that if you don't believe in the same exact way that I believe, then you are going to hell! No wonder it is something that we avoid.

Today's Bible story from Acts 16 is about a different kind of example of sharing of faith. The Apostle Paul has a mystical vision where he is led by the Spirit of God to go to cross an important barrier and go to preach the gospel. He is invited to go to Europe, to the Gentiles. This was a major step for the early church. The followers of Jesus in chapter 15 of Acts had a major debate over whether it was a good idea to reach out beyond the Jewish community with the message of Christ. For many years, the followers of Jesus saw themselves as part of the Jewish faith and so believed that their call was to tell the story of Jesus only to Jews who would follow Jesus but also would uphold the practices of the Jewish faith. But through the lead of the Spirit, the followers of Christ realized that the message of Christ could not be limited to one group of people. It was to be shared with those who were considered outside the faith. Indeed, Paul responds to the call and travels with Silas and starts heading towards Macedonia. On the way, he meets a group of women who were gathered in place of prayer on the Sabbath. When he shares the story of Christ with them, these women receive the story and claim it as their own. One of them, Lydia was especially open to the message of love that she insisted on hosting them in her home. Lydia is mentioned later in this chapter as also opening her home to Paul and Silas after they were out of jail. Her home became a faith center for the followers of Christ in Philippi.

It is interesting to note a few things about the example of Paul and his sharing of the story of Christ. First, expect the unexpected. Paul and Silas went to a place of prayer by the river. Normally that is the place where the Jews of a city or a town would gather to pray on the Sabbath. The Jewish Law stipulated that when there was a minimum of ten Jewish men, a synagogue should be formed. Failing to reach that number, then “a place of prayer” could be established outdoors (a synagogue being a building as well as a congregation) where the Law could be taught and prayers could be offered to God. That “place of prayer” was usually to be beside a moving body of water, such as a river. Normally men would gather to be part of this public worship, but instead Paul and his companion find a group of women. They do not turn away from them and go elsewhere to find a group of men. Instead Paul and Silas speak to them and share the story of Christ with them. When God opens a door before us, we are to respond despite our prejudices and cultural limitations. Not only was this a group of women, but we are also told that Lydia was a Gentile, “a worshipper of God,” which was a designation for someone from outside the Jewish faith. The second thing to remember about this story is that God was the one who opened Lydia's heart. We are only invited to share our stories. God is the one who works in our hearts. Faith in Christ is a movement of the heart. It is not about the dogmas and

doctrines of the church. It is not about converting people to be Presbyterians just like us. It is about helping each other celebrate the mystery of God's presence in our lives. We can't come from a place of arrogance and thinking that we know it all as we share the story of Christ. It must be out of a place of love, solidarity and mutuality with others.

This is very critical for us as people of faith. Many people in our world, in our lives are hungry for faith and for knowing that God's love is there for them. Faith not only makes a tremendous difference in our world, it makes our whole world different. So, our sharing of faith with others is critical. Yet, the way we share our stories is just as important and the motivation we have for sharing our stories is also important. For many years, American missionaries were sent to other countries to share their faith in Christ with others, but what they ended up sharing was often their cultural limitations and their prejudices. Many on the mission field felt that their Western culture was superior to the other cultures and that their religion was the only true religion. These attitudes became a hindrance to sharing the faith. This was especially true in the case of the spread of Christianity in Africa. In his book, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, Lamin Sanneh shows how Western mission work for over 100 years did not bear much fruit. While the indigenous work of Christians sharing their faith has brought tremendous growth to the church. One key difference between Western mission and African mission is that African Christians use the indigenous names for God in the sharing of their faith because that is what the people there understood. They don't expect people to leave their cultures and practices in order to become Christians. Rather they see that the story of Christ is a new way of looking at their lives as they are. In 1970 there were 120 million Christians in Africa. In 1998, the figure jumped to just under 330 million; in 2000 to 350 million. The projections call for over 600 million Christians in 25 years. With those numbers, apart from South America, Africa will have more Christians than any other continent, and that for the first time. What can we learn from this? Is our way of thinking the only way of knowing and sharing Christ? What are the barriers to our sharing of the faith with integrity and respect? When Paul and the others in Jerusalem decided to let their faith in Christ be a universal movement (not just for the Jews), they were able to go beyond their cultural limits and share without the requirements of a legalistic faith, without the fear of people of other faith traditions and without the rigidity of doctrine and dogma. Are we able to share our story and let others share their story?

In his book, *Befriending the Stranger*, Jean Vanier, notes that, "In the midst of all the violence and corruption of the world God invites us today to create new places of belonging, places of sharing, of peace and of kindness, places where no-one needs to defend himself or herself; places where each one is loved and accepted with one's own fragility, abilities and disabilities. This is my vision for our churches: that they become places of belonging, places of sharing." This is an incredible invitation to us as people of faith. I don't imagine that tomorrow all of us as Presbyterians will be knocking on doors and inviting strangers to church. Yet, I do imagine that we all have friends and family members who are hurting and wounded in this life and who need a place of belonging and love, and I do know that we can share the love of Christ with them and help them know that they are not on this journey alone. It is not an invitation to tell them what to think and how to behave. It is a call to form a community of love and acceptance.

Once upon a time there was a young woman who loved to go walking in the forest near where she lived. She knew the paths and ways of the forest and was always careful to turn back towards her home before it was dark. But one day she went walking and had a lot on her mind. Without realizing it, the day had grown late. She also was not paying attention to where she was walking. She turned for the familiar path, she knew immediately that she was lost. But she did not panic. She decided to spend the night under a great tree and wait for the sun to rise and get

her bearings. It was a long night. When the dawn came, she studied where she was and began to realize that she was hopelessly lost. Day after day she tried to find her way out, but without any success. She learned to survive but the days became months and she was still lost. One morning, as she was searching in yet another part of the woods for any signs of human life, she heard a sound of another person. Before she could hide, a young man stepped out from behind a close of trees and they stood facing each other, both frozen in fear and surprise. She looked around trying to decide if she should run and then they both spoke at once: "I'm lost!" and with that they began to talk: about how long they thought they had been in the woods, where they thought they had been in the woods, where home was and how hard it was to be wandering around. Both asked the other, not wanting to hear the answer: "You don't have a clue about how to get out of these woods, do you?" And they both had to admit that neither of them knew the way out. But after sharing some water and food they had found, they looked at each other and said: "All is not lost. You've been wandering around for months and you know a lot of ways and directions that don't lead out and I've been doing the same thing. Together we can find a way out and home. We can share our knowledge and it will be easier to find water and food and shelter. We can watch each other's backs. It took them a while, but they both soon came to realize that they both had gone into the woods searching for answers, for the Holy One's presence and a sense of themselves. Then they realized that they were not lost! Life is about taking paths and changing ways, and we are meant to find one another on the way and to learn to share life anew, together repairing our own souls as best we can and together helping each other to repair the world.