

Acts 16:9-15
May 22, 2022
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Purple Church

Today is one of the great days in the life of every congregation, the day when we ordain and install a new class of officers. One of my favorite things about Presbyterian polity—which is the technical term for how and why we do what we do—is that we ordain and install church officers in the same way we ordain and install clergy. My ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament almost 26 years ago does not set me above other church officers; rather it sets me apart for a specific role within the church community. These new officers will answer almost all of the same questions I answered all those years ago in the sanctuary of my home church, the same questions I answered just a few months back in October on these very same steps. These women and men have prayerfully considered God’s call to serve and lead within this specific community during this season, and they have participated faithfully in officer training. I love officer training. Yes, I know that solidifies my Presby-nerd status and shreds any notion of my being cool or hip. But officer training has become for me a joyful and sacred season, one in which we get a chance to pause and reflect on how God weaves our story into the larger divine story, how the people we have known, the places we have gone, and the experiences we have had all overlap to bring us to this place and this moment. This holy work of weaving includes stops and starts, successes and disappointments, and a whole host of surprises along the way. It has for all of us, and we’re in good company, because the holy work of story weaving is a complex mix of these things and more for Paul and Lydia, too.

Today’s passage skips from last week’s visit with Peter to this morning’s travel alongside Paul. At the end of chapter 15, Paul and his previous traveling companion Barnabas decide to go

their separate ways. Paul partners with Silas and then invites Timothy to join him in his travels. Paul has his itinerary all planned out; God has other plans. As another preacher, points out:

In the passage preceding this week's reading, the Holy Spirit forbids Paul to go to Asia, and the spirit of Jesus won't allow the band into northwest Asia Minor. By the time Paul dreams of Macedonia, he's had his vision for ministry rebuked by multiple members of the Trinity.¹

It helps me to know that Paul has his own stop-sign moments. It also helps me to see that many of his stop-sign moments become God's detour moments. I'm reluctant to say that every stop sign is a holy one.; there are far too many stop signs for too many of our siblings that are neither godly nor holy. Nor do I believe that there is always an open window for every closed door; it is not always that simple or that cut and dry. That said, in hindsight I can see multiple times when God called me out of a dead end and into a new chapter. And that is what I believe is going on here.

And it is this holy detour that leads Paul to Lydia. Lydia we are told is a seller of purple cloth. Tradition holds that she is a wealthy woman who heads her own household. Different church traditions revere her as a saint and point out that she is the first person to be baptized on European soil. Little else is said about her in scripture. What we know of her we read in this chapter of Acts. She is at least curious about the God of Israel before Paul and the others come her way, and as a God-fearer she may already be faithful in following Jewish practices without having converted officially to Judaism. On this sabbath day, she gathers outside the city gate with other women at a known place of prayer. She listens to all that Paul preaches and is

¹ "BLOGGING TOWARD SUNDAY: Come and help us," May 03, 2010 for the *Christian Century* by [Bromleigh McClenaghan](#). Cited by Mary Ann McKibben Dana in her paper for the Well, 2013.

baptized along with her entire household. And then she insists that Paul and the others take shelter in her home. As my friend and colleague Mary Ann McKibben Dana writes:

The first act of discipleship of a Christian convert on the European continent is ... hospitality, giving of oneself. Opening one's home and heart—the ultimate act of vulnerability.²

At the end of this chapter, Lydia will host Paul and Silas once again, when they are escaped prisoners. This seller of purple cloth, which is intended only to clothe nobility and royalty is woven into the story herself because she listens and welcomes these ragtag strangers. And this is all we hear of her; this is all we know. Lydia and her household are but one piece of a larger creation. And yet her role is crucial, and her openness and vulnerability are essential to the work of the fledgling church—one small thread, one tiny piece of a larger creation, a bigger life-giving, world-transforming story. I wonder where or who we would be without her.

To quote the contemporary sage, Dr. Taylor Swift in her recent commencement address to the graduates of New York University:

Not a single one of us here today has done it alone. We are each a patchwork quilt of those who have loved us, those who have believed in our futures, those who showed us empathy and kindness or told us the truth even when it wasn't easy to hear. Those who told us we could do it when there was absolutely no proof of that. Someone read stories to you and taught you to dream and offered up some moral code of right and wrong for you to try and live by. Someone tried their best to explain every concept in this insanely complex world to the child that was you, as you asked a bazillion questions like 'how does the moon work' and 'why can we eat salad but not grass.' And maybe they didn't do

² Mary Ann McKibben Dana in her paper for the Well, 2013

it perfectly. No one ever can. Maybe they aren't with us anymore, and in that case I hope you'll remember them today. If they are here in this stadium, I hope you'll find your own way to express your gratitude for all the steps and missteps that have led us to this common destination.³

I appreciate Dr. Swift's claim that we are a patchwork quilt, both as individuals and as a community, brought to this moment through a myriad of steps and missteps taken by those who have come before us, taken by those who walk alongside us, and taken by us ourselves.

The men and women whom you have elected to serve in this next class of officers are a patchwork of experiences, backgrounds, personalities, and beliefs. Over the past few weeks, together we have explored why Presbyterians do what we do and about what their different roles encompass, and we have learned more about one another as well. This past Tuesday night, they talked with current session members about the statements of faith they had each written, and more than a few talked about the people who have shaped them and their faith. I heard more than one speak of grandparents and parents, and one of them even spoke about the wisdom of a great-great grandfather who was a Presbyterian pastor. They spoke of growing up in other churches, in this church, or in no church at all. They spoke of finding belonging in the choir and the Journey Sunday school class, reflecting on faith during quarantine, the loving support of this community during frightening health crises and devastating deaths of dear ones. Their stories weave together to form one part of an exquisite tapestry, a beautiful patchwork quilt, or even an extension of Lydia's luxurious purple cloth.

For years scholars, sceptics, and preachers have wondered aloud and debated the existence and purpose of the purple church, a church that stakes out a big tent, a broad middle

³ <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/taylor-swift-nyu-commencement-speech-full-transcript-1235072824/>

between the poles of red and blue. Some have wondered if such a church is still of use. Is a purple church lukewarm or too cautious? Wouldn't we be more faithful if we were all of one stripe? No. There is something deeply sacred in a community that is not lockstep in its beliefs, one that is varied in its views of the world. There are scores of people of all ages, shapes, and backgrounds who are craving community, countless others outside any number of gates who long to be heard, seen, valued, and embraced by just such a community. And it is holy work to open our eyes and extend our boundaries like Paul does to seek and see God's beloved ones who are already praying, already faithful beyond our walls. They have much to teach us about what it means to be God's family. For I believe we all have been and are being woven together for a larger, holy purpose, and that we are more faithful when we are a community comprised of a variety of voices and personalities and backgrounds and beliefs.

To be clear: it is harder to be that kind of community. Professing our faith in Jesus Christ is the starting point. Beyond that, being a faithfully purple, patchwork church requires prayer, patience, compromise, humility, an appreciation for the humanity and dignity of every single person, a willingness to ask for forgiveness, and a willingness to forgive. It requires hard work, faithfulness, and commitment. It requires more than a smattering of shared joy, laughter, and tears. And it takes grace, sacred, irreplaceable divine grace, because as Paul reminds us elsewhere, all fall short of what God intends. All. Every. Last. One. Which is the gift of being part of a larger whole, woven into a larger story. When we are at our best, grace enables us to lend beauty and strength to the larger fabric. When we are worn and tattered, grace provides a beautiful and not easily unraveled creation that holds us close and holds us up. A single thread may be lovely. A solitary swatch of fabric may be stunning. But the breath-taking beauty of an unending swath of hand-dyed purple fabric is unmatched, and a patchwork quilt comprised of

infinite and unique parts and pieces is an exquisite and holy creation unrivaled by any tiny patch
I can create on my own.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.