Acts 16:6-15
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Rivers, Labyrinths, and Real Church

As you may recall, when we first meet Paul (or Saul as he is known then), he is among the chief persecutors of the fledgling church. While on his way to Damascus to round up followers of the Way, Saul is stopped in his tracks by a blinding light. In the midst of the light a voice cries out asking why Saul is persecuting him. When Saul asks who it is, the voice responds, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Jesus goes on to tell Saul to get up and await further instructions. Saul remains in Damascus for three days unable to see and unable to eat or drink. When we meet him in this morning's text, Paul has already been on his first journey, sharing the Good News and planting churches in Gentile territory. He is now in the midst of his second journey, accompanied by Silas and Timothy. [Read Acts 16:6-15]

I was tempted to stand up here and share this preacher's version of "what I did last summer," complete with slides of old French buildings and pictures of pictures hanging on museum walls. That's not a sermon of course, so it's not really faithful to what I'm called to do from this pulpit, nor do I think it would be faithful to the time I spent away from you this summer. My time in Paris (and Nashville and Atlantic Beach, among others) can't be completely summed up in photos collected in a tidy Instagram post.

While I was away, I came across an article that talked about Paris Syndrome, an extreme form of culture shock, when someone arrives in the City of Light fully expecting the idealized place she has come to know from movies, fashion shoots in magazines, and yes, Instagram and

TikTok.[1] When we first arrived in Paris, we lugged our—ok, my—overstuffed suitcases up four flights of winding stairs after discovering that my rusty language skills weren't quite what they were when I was 20 and that the lovely pedestrian street outside was under construction and would be filled with backhoes and jackhammers for the month. I also realized quite quickly that there is no French food fairy who would trek to the grocery store to make sure we had food to eat. I wouldn't say that I experienced Paris Syndrome, but I was a bit thrown at first. Hot, sticky, and noisy Paris was not on my bucket list. And then I got over my whiny pitiful self, got some food and a coffee, and we made our way to the Seine, the famous river that winds its way through the center of the city. Some of you have asked what my favorite part of Paris was. There were so many, but walking along the Seine, crossing bridges between the Left Bank and the Right Bank at the close of a summer day remains at the top of my list. Yes, the beautiful buildings and bridges look particularly pretty in the fading sunlight, but the small bands playing music with preschoolers and eighty-year olds dancing, teenagers laughing and taking selfies are the "piece de resistance." At least for me.

When I read that Paul and his companions head to the river after being buffeted off course, it makes sense to me. In my experience, good things can be found by a river and water has a way of right-sizing things. Paul and his companions' pattern is to head to a synagogue when they reach a new place. Phillippi, a cosmopolitan seaport apparently does not have a synagogue, so Paul heads down to the river where he finds some women gathered. Paul gets a bad rap when it comes to women, some of which he deserves. Goodness knows some of his words—or words attributed to him and interpreted in a particular way—make someone like me

[1] https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/what-is-paris-syndrome-b2477677.html

more than a bit problematic for some of our Christian siblings. And yet, here and throughout much of Acts, Paul is grateful to be hosted, welcomed, and supported by women like Lydia. Apparently, the Apostle Paul is a mixed bag, just as we all are. Lydia, too, is from out of town. She has made a home in Philippi, selling purple cloth, a luxury good only the wealthy can afford. We can assume she makes a decent living, but her work and even her relative wealth are not the things that define her in any ultimate way. Paul encounters her and the others on the sabbath, the day of worship and rest in the Jewish tradition, a tradition that the rest of Phillippi does not necessarily observe. And Lydia has chosen to gather on the sabbath with other women outside the city for fellowship and prayer. We are told that she is a God-worshipper, a Gentile who reveres the God of ancient Israel but has not converted in any formal way to Judaism. The Holy Spirit opens her ears and heart to what Paul has to say, and Lydia and her entire household are baptized.

Remember that Paul initially headed to Macedonia to answer a call for help he heard from an unnamed man in a vision. Gathering with a group of women beside a river was not on his agenda and was likely not how he imagined this missionary journey would go, and yet the church at Phillippi winds up being very important to Paul. In the first chapter of his letter to the church at Phillippi, Paul writes:

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

And it starts here, with a gathering of strangers by a river in Phillippi. Paul could have said, "Nope, this is not what I had in mind," and moved on, but he didn't. He stayed and another church community was born.

I have wanted to walk the labyrinth at Chartres cathedral for over 30 years, since I first walked a canvas one in seminary in Richmond. This year marks the Chartres labyrinth's 1000th birthday, which means that for 1000 years faithful ones from all over the world have walked those same cratered bumpy bricks, cradling their hopes, their doubts, their fears, and their failings and offering it all to the Lord of all in prayer and devotion. My husband, Dave and I planned to go on a Thursday so we could wake up and walk it on Friday morning, the only time it is open to the public each week. Except that week it was closed. Sensing my disappointment, Dave graciously suggested that we come back for a day trip and walk it later. For the next few weeks, I imagined walking the labyrinth largely in silence, maybe with an angel choir singing from the flying buttresses. That's not how it worked. There was no angel choir. Instead, there were other tourist labyrinth walkers and there were church ladies. Children and sweethearts and a serious young man and nice ladies from the American Midwest in hiking boots and the two of us gathered around the outside of the labyrinth and prayed the Lord's Prayer in a multitude of languages before we walked the winding path to the center. The church ladies told us when to start, hoping to spread us out, but we still wound up clumping up and bumping elbows occasionally. One of the church ladies firmly but quietly cut across the labyrinth and corrected a young woman who started to remove her shoes. Some of us knelt when we reached the center; others giggled self-consciously; while others simply sighed with closed eyes and offered a brief prayer before the next person arrived. It was a bit messy and a tad chaotic, and yet it was more beautiful and more powerful than my romanticized imagination had contrived. It wasn't my ideal. It was better because it looked and felt like church, real church.

Maybe Paul didn't experience Phillippi syndrome because he never had time to romanticize Phillippi, but I know many people would tell you that they have experienced church syndrome. They pine for a perfect place with perfect people with no conflict and no mistakes, and they are shocked and disappointed when they realize that that's not church. The church I love, the church I serve, the church I missed while I was away is a blessedly mixed bag of dear ones who do not always get it all just so, whatever "it" may be. We get confused and make mistakes. We get our feelings hurt and our hearts broken. We also make a joyful noise and hammer nails for Habitat and hug with abandon and serve meals to homebound seniors and grin at babies and sort secondhand treasures to sell for CCM and Bayonnais and show up at gravesides and bedsides, even when we don't have the foggiest idea what to say.

On Sunday, June 15, Dave and I worshipped at the American Cathedral, the home base for the Episcopal church in Europe. The sanctuary was beautiful, as were the music and the liturgy. The presiding bishop was there, and the flowers were exquisite. And there were typos in the bulletin, and the ushers got a little confused, and a few toddlers squirmed and fussed while their parents shushed them and blushed and tried to pay attention. It was lovely and still uppermost in my mind and heart was gratitude for this place and these people who welcomed me with open arms and hearts on June 15, 2021. To borrow from our brother Paul:

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

By the grace of our amazing God, we're just getting started, dear ones, and it is oh so good to be home.

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