

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear friends in Christ,

This weekend we are celebrating the confirmation of 10 Good Shepherd teens. Let me tell you, they put in some hard work to come to this day. We spent many, many hours studying the Bible in class, time memorizing Martin Luther's useful summary of the Bible's teaching, which we call the Small Catechism, time memorizing Scripture passages, time doing homework assignments which repeated the Bible truths we covered each class. And I want to thank these young men and women for all those hours they dedicated to these studies.

But because of their knowledge of God's Word, I know that they will agree with me that today is actually not a celebration of what they have done. Rather, it is a celebration of what God has done in them and what God does and will do through them. Today is really about a celebration of God's grace. It's God's grace that originally created faith in the hearts of each one of them and it is God's grace that has enabled them to grow in the faith up to this moment today. It is God's grace that will continue to work in them from this day forward as they continue to grow in faith for the rest of their lives.

And so today we take some time to remember and rejoice that they are and we are children of God... and all thanks, praise, honor and glory for that fact belongs to God alone.

To help us put our focus where it belongs today, we turn our attention to the book of Acts chapter 16, beginning at the 11th verse. This is an amazing story that gives us a little snapshot of what God has done in each of these confirmands and in all of you who call yourselves Christians. I hope you will gain a new appreciation for the miracle that is faith.

We pick up the story in the middle of the apostle Paul's second missionary journey. Last week we learned that the book of Acts records three missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, and we looked at something that happened at the end of his 3rd journey. Today we rewind a little bit to the 2nd journey. The first part of the journey, Paul was visiting previously established Christian congregations in the area of Galatia and Phrygia... modern day central Turkey. They were gradually making their way west. But at one point, God put a road block in their way. They could either head north and enter a region called Bythynia, or they could head southwest into an area called Asia (western Turkey). But the spirit of God somehow made it clear that they were not to enter those areas. Unless they backtracked, there was only one place to go... head due west straight to the coast of the Aegean Sea. They made it to the coastal city of Troas, and finally they got clear direction from the Lord. Paul had a dream about a man from Macedonia begging them, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

That meant getting on a boat and heading into the Aegean Sea and over to modern day Greece. And that's where we pick up the story:

11 From Troas we [the "we" here is Paul and Barnabus, plus a young pastor-in-training named Timothy, plus a doctor named Luke. Luke is the one writing the book of Acts. Before this point, he wrote, "they." But from Troas on, he writes, "we." I wish we knew more of the story of this interesting man who wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. How is it that he joined their journey at this point? We just don't know. But now there is a traveling physician with the team, and an eye witness and recorder for the journey.] **put out to sea and sailed straight for**

Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. 12 From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

Neapolis was a seaport on the north side of the Aegean Sea. From there they headed inland just a little ways to a town called Philippi which was an important city in the district of Macedonia. It was Roman colony, which means the citizens there enjoyed freedoms that subjugated cities did not enjoy. It notable was that it was located along the Via Egnatia, or the Egnatian Way. That was a famous 490 mile stretch of road built by the Romans to make travel in their vast empire quicker and easier. So Philippi was along a vitally important trading route as well.

And let's not forget... why are they there? It was the Lord's will. He rushed them right through western Turkey, and got them to Macedonia in very short order. God was directing this whole affair, which we need to keep in mind as we hear this:

13 On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.

You see, Paul's custom when he entered a new city was to first visit the synagogue and preach about Christ there. He knew that as a man trained as a Pharisee, he would always have an audience and be given a hearing if he went to the synagogue. There he would also people who already were well-versed in the Old Testament and therefore had a good knowledge of God. What they were missing was the key to unlocking the meaning of all of Scriptures, and that was Jesus Christ.

In Philippi, there was no synagogue. And that meant there were few Jews living there. It took at least 10 men to form a synagogue. There were apparently not enough. In fact, in this story we will see that there were not any men mentioned! The first members of the church in Philippi would all be women.

So with no synagogue in town, Paul guessed that any Jews who were in town would meet down by the river on the Sabbath. Because of the ceremonial washings required in the Old Testament, a water source like a river was a common place to meet. And sure enough, Paul found a few of the faithful at the river.

We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

Now if Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke had behaved according to the cultural norms, this would not have happened. In the Greek culture, women had no more rights than slaves. What they believed was dictated by the man of the house, and they had no right speaking to these strange men about religion. Even in the Jewish culture, it was inappropriate to address women about religious matters. But these four men did not follow the cultural norms, they obeyed God's command and will, namely, to preach Christ crucified to any man or woman that would listen. For God declared that men and women are of equal importance in his sight, and he desires that all people, regardless of gender, be saved. So there they are preaching about Christ on a Saturday morning to a small group of women who had gathered for prayer.

14 One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God.

What's interesting is that Lydia was a Greek woman, not a Jew. That phrase "she was a worshiper of God" was a technical term for a heathen, non-Jewish convert to Judaism. She was not Jewish in her bloodline, but was Jewish by faith. She knew and worshiped the one true God.

Lydia was from Thyatira. Ironically, the city was in that region called Asia where the Holy Spirit had prevented Paul from going. The city was famous for the purple cloth that was

made there. Purple cloth was what royalty would wear. The dye which they used was very difficult to obtain and so purple clothes were very expensive... which is why the royalty and the rich would wear it.

Now, what about this woman? Listen, because this is important. Luke is so brief in his description we could breeze right by it and not give it the attention it deserves:

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. 15 ... she and the members of her household were baptized...

Note what it *doesn't* say: And she opened her heart to Paul's message? No. She accepted Jesus into her heart and she believed? No! The Lord opened her heart. The Lord created faith. He created faith through the Word preached. And then she and her whole household were also baptized. Faith created and strengthened through that baptism as well. All of this was God's work, not Lydia's work.

Remember how I said at the beginning of our time today that confirmation is really a celebration of what God had done, not what they have done? Look at the case of Lydia. The whole reason the good news of Jesus even came to this woman was because God set up the timing and circumstances and the situation so that Lydia would come in contact with the gospel. It was the Holy Spirit who worked through that gospel to open her heart so she would believe.

It is no less amazing that we have come to faith today. We certainly did nothing to deserve it. If you're like me, you can think of countless mistakes and failures in your life that by all rights should have disqualified you from the Kingdom of God. Because of our sins, God has every right to pass over us and find someone else. Someone more fit. Someone more worthy.

But for reasons I can't explain. God wanted me. God wanted you. And he moved heaven and earth to make sure we could become his children. Just think of the timing, the circumstances and the situations necessary so that you would come into contact with the good news of Jesus. I want you to understand that it is not a coincidence, but a gift of God's grace and a sign of his personal love for you that you have heard the gospel and believed.

Think of all the variables that had to work out just right. For most of you, the gospel was given to you through your family. That doesn't make it any less miraculous! Think of the history of your family tree that happened so that your family knows the gospel. Think of how that gospel could have been missed or forgotten or dropped over the history of your family tree in many times and in many ways. Yet by God's grace, here you are. There are billions on the planet who have had little or no contact with the gospel of Jesus. But you have! Wow! God is good. Thank him today that he arranged all of history to make sure you received his good news!

But also remember there are many who hear the good news but don't believe. The fact that you have had the opportunity to hear AND God opened your heart to believe is just amazing.

You have heard the good news that because of your sin and rebellion, the only hope of restoration with God is in God. And God took action. God did it! He sent his one and only Son into our world. He lived holy, blameless and perfect as the Father required. He did this as our substitute. He was obedient even unto death, even death on a cross. There he bore our sin and paid its debt in full. The wrath that should have been poured out on us was instead poured out on Him. And by his wounds, you are healed. By the sacrifice of his life your life is spared. In Christ Jesus, God considers you a saint. Holy. Blameless. Pure. Fit for heaven!

You see, the Lord not only opened Lydia's heart. He opened your heart too. He has opened your heart to respond to this message and you believe! And you have been baptized! And

this is truly something to celebrate today. Not something we did or do. But something God has done and continues to do!

Now there's one more little part left here I don't want you to miss:

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

When God opened her heart, that was something that occurred on the inside and was invisible to the world. We talked about that in catechism class, didn't we? We can't see the faith that exists in a person's heart. In fact, a true believer and a hypocrite that goes through all the right motions... they look very similar on the outside. Only God knows the heart.

When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come..." we are praying that Jesus would create faith in our hearts and in the hearts of others. Whenever a person trusts in Christ, he sets up his kingdom and his rule in that person's heart. But we don't see the hearts of others. You know your own heart, but not other people's hearts.

But the end of this story of Lydia shows us that what's in the heart overflows into our lives. When the Lord opened her heart to believe that Jesus was her Lord and Savior, yes, it was a matter of the heart. But it very quickly overflowed into her life.

Listen, she could have kept that faith buried deep, and just returned to her life of selling purple cloth. Or she could have waited for Paul to ask her to serve in some way. But that's not how it went. She was compelled by the love of Christ to step up and volunteer... no, to INSIST... that she be allowed to participate in their gospel ministry. She invited the traveling missionaries to her home. She was hospitable and generous with them and insisted that they use her house as a base of operations for the continuing gospel ministry that would take place in Philippi. She was compelled to help with the gospel mission in any way she could. And one way she could was to help take care of food and shelter for the missionaries so they could preach to others.

Dear friends (and confirmands), my prayer is your faith in Jesus will also be just as evident in your daily lives... that it would spontaneously overflow, irresistibly pour out into your life. Because Lydia loved Jesus, she was forcefully insisted that she serve as she could. And she did. How about you?

All who believe in Jesus are prompted to serve by the love of Jesus. The Lord has opened *your* heart... so how will you serve him? What will your role be in sharing the gospel of Jesus here in Omaha and around the world? What do you have that can be used for him and his glory? How will you leverage your possessions for his kingdom? Who do you know that you can love on and invite so they too can have their hearts opened by the Lord? How can you volunteer and serve to participate in your church's work in bring Jesus to our community?

You see, Lydia's story is your story. The Lord opened her heart. The Lord has opened your heart. Celebrate your God of grace! Respond to his grace with joyful, eager, enthusiastic service to him for the rest of your life! May God's name be glorified by us and through us! Amen.