

Outside the Gate

“It almost didn’t happen.”¹ If Paul had continued on his journey as planned, he and Lydia would likely have never crossed paths. Paul has parted ways with Barnabas and is now joined by Silas and Timothy as he heads out again. It’s funny though. He keeps trying to go places where God apparently does not want him to go. They repeatedly set their GPS for Asia, and yet, something—or more pointedly—*someone* stops them. The text does not tell us that they were frustrated, but it would make sense if they were. We don’t know the details of the detours or what form they take; we are not told that there is a big neon sign or a more subtle nudge to change course. We are simply invited to come along as Paul and his traveling companions try to figure out where exactly God wants them to go next.

I’ve been fortunate enough to have done a fair amount of traveling, at least around Europe. I have done the touristy things, but some of my most memorable moments were detours of sorts. There was the lunch in a place filled with local Florentines where a man invited Dave and me to sit with him and then proceeded to order everything for us. He did not speak more than a few words of English, and we do not speak any Italian. I have no idea what some of the food even was, but it is still one of the best meals I have ever eaten. There was the dinner somewhere southeast of Paris where I gathered with other students one summer evening around couscous filled with fresh veggies from the farm where we were staying for the night. And there was the protestant church in that same village where this Presbyterian from Nashville, Tennessee found deep comfort in the familiar words in a new language inscribed on the spare church walls. Those words from the gospel of John offered a witness and a welcome I did not know I needed, a reassurance that God was there, too, without my having to pack God up in my backpack along with my passport.

Paul is always on the road, always in a new place meeting new people for the sake of the gospel. After a dream where a man pleads with him to come help him in Macedonia, Paul and the others head on their way and wind up in Philippi, a major city in the region. We are also told that it is a Roman colony, just in case we have forgotten how vast the reach of the Empire is. When they arrive, they make their way not to City Hall or the

¹ As pointed out by Ronald Cole-Turner, “Theological Perspective,” Acts 16:9-15, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox) 474.

town square, but to a place of prayer, outside the gate. And there they find themselves in conversation not with a man but with a group of women, including Lydia. Lydia is a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth, a luxury item. Only the elite can wear purple, so Lydia's business weaves her in and among the 1%, but that does not necessarily make her one of them. The text also tells us that she, too, is an outsider, an immigrant to Philippi from Thyatira, hundreds of miles away. She is head of her own household, a rarity in the ancient world for a woman. And she is a God-fearer, a Gentile who believes in the God of Israel, but has not formally become part of the community. It's not clear that there is even a formal community for her to join; the Jewish population in cities this distant from Jerusalem remains small. A critical mass is necessary to have a formal synagogue, a quorum—or a minyan of ten adult males and yet, here is Lydia, along with these other women, outside the gate in the makeshift place of prayer, a synagogue of sorts. In a strange place, surrounded by unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar voices, Paul meets at least one person who shares his dearest devotion, his most fundamental identity: one who reveres and worships the one true God. They could not be more different: he is a zealous Jewish man turned wandering missionary for a crucified Savior; she is a female Gentile transplant who makes a living selling pricey goods to the Roman elite. And yet, in each other they find a common faith, a shared devotion. And this happens as they meet not in the Temple in Jerusalem, or in the midst of the movers and shakers, but on a riverbank, outside the city gate. All because his wandering and hers lead them there.

My friend and colleague Mary Ann McKibben Dana reminded me of a story about another wandering one, Columba:

...a priest in sixth-century Ireland, who got in a rudderless boat and let God and providence take him where he was meant to be. He made landfall once, but decided to push out again because he could still see his homeland on the horizon behind him. The second place he landed was Iona, the island where Christianity touched Scotland for the first time.²

I am a creature of habit. I tend to eat the same thing for breakfast every morning. I run the same routes and drive the same way to church most days. While I love traveling, in my everyday life, I do not tend to go where I cannot see something familiar. I do not wander much, and if I do, I rely fairly heavily on my trusty phone and

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

some apps to tell me where I am. Seeing my home on the horizon behind me is like a safety net, a tether of sorts that helps me remember where I am and who I am. I cannot imagine getting into a rudderless boat and trusting the tides to take me where I need to go. And if I did, I sure as heck cannot imagine deciding that the first stop isn't quite far enough. I am quite comfortable within my circumscribed little world. I am not Paul; nor am I Lydia. Although I suspect I could learn something from both of them. Maybe the church could, too.

Because things look different beyond the horizon. And things look different outside the gate, wherever that gate may be, even if that gate, that dividing line, that wall is only a stone's throw away. I have grown fairly familiar with the twists and turns in Allendale and College Park, but I haven't spent much time in the neighborhoods on the other side of Carlisle Road, unless I count Starbucks, McDonald's, or CVS, and no, those don't really count. I haven't spent any time in the laundromat or the nail salon. I confess that I do not know the names of anyone who works at Cedar Cliff pizza or Subway. I could not tell you the names of any streets that wind around back there or even anyone who lives there, I don't think. Those places are not far away, but they are just enough outside my gate that they are almost as unfamiliar as that riverbank in Philippi. But I am certain that God is at work in the lives of people in those places. God doesn't need to go through me to get to them, but I wonder what I might learn if I ventured beyond the safety of my gate to go and see what God might be up to. Because it is not my home or my routines that define who I am or whose I am. It is Jesus Christ, the very one who always managed to be on the other side of the gate with others and outsiders. Shouldn't his church be there, too?

Like Jesus, Paul does not sit back and wait for people to come see him. He does not hang out or hole up and simply wait for Lydia to come his way. Instead he goes looking, curious and expectant to see where God is already at work. Because, Paul knows and trusts that God is already at work. He sees this work in Lydia, and in conversation with her, he is simply the one to share his story of his encounter with the risen Christ. It is a conversation, not a lecture. This conversation provides an opportunity for her to join the community, to confirm her faith in God by being baptized and being welcomed fully and formally into the family of faith.

One off-shoot of my vocation is that when I tell people what I do, they quite often have a faith story or a church story to tell me, and quite often the faith story and the church story part ways somewhere. I wonder if

that could be true in Lydia's case. I wonder who first told her about God, where she first learned of the Lord of all, and why it didn't go any farther than the riverbank. Maybe there was no formal Jewish community in Philippi or Thyatira. Or maybe it was something else. Did someone write her off because she's a woman? Was her independence a problem? Was her being an outsider or a merchant a threat? Or did she simply find her people, her community outside that gate and stay there?

This past week marked the 50th anniversary of the protests at Stonewall, when people of all different gender identities stood up to those who would sideline them, or worse. It also marked the 50th anniversary of protests in Harrisburg when the black community spoke up about racist policies and practices that led to despair, fear, and anger. Even 50 years later, bias, hatred, and alienation still face both communities. Lots of gates still remain. Everywhere. And we seem hell bent on constructing even more. I get it. We feel safer with gates. Inside them we find familiarity and comfort. Our gay siblings and our brothers and sisters of color still find themselves outside the gate in many ways, or at least on the other side from many of us. Yes, some gather there by choice, perhaps because they feel more at home there or because they feel seen or understood or simply safer there. Others gather there because they have received a lukewarm welcome or no welcome at all in too many churches. The same could be said of those who gather outside the gate due to poverty, mental illness, employment status, education, or age. And for all of our talk of welcome, I worry that our welcome falls flat—if it even makes it past those gates, if it ever reaches them at all.

In Lydia, Paul discovers not simply a new convert, but a companion in the faith, one who insists that he and the others make her home their home while they are there. In Lydia, Paul finds a place of rest from his wandering ways, an unexpected welcome, a home he did not know he needed. So maybe it is time for me—and even the church—to wander outside the gates a bit more, to trust that God is at work beyond our routines and regular routes, even down on the riverbank. Maybe it is time to step outside the gate, beyond the walls, and see what God is up to in the lives of those who do not look or love or live like me. Who knows? With these friends on the riverbank, with these companions outside our gate, we might just find faith unimagined. We might just discover a rest and a welcome we did not know we needed. We might just meet Jesus there.

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