

Acts 16:9-15

In our reading from Acts this morning we journey with Paul who is following a night vision. Have you had a night vision, something, perhaps a dream that is so powerful you wake up with it still on your mind? Perhaps even remembering it weeks after you dreamt it. Have you ever considered this may be a call from God, something God wants you to accomplish?

Paul was hearing a call from God and he chose to follow it. The man in his dream is calling him to come to Macedonia. Paul knew this was an invitation from God to take the gospel to Macedonia. As soon as he possibly could he boarded a ship and set off, eventually making it to Philippi, a city in the Roman co of Macedonia.

After being there a few days and getting the feel of the place they went, on the sabbath morning, ending up at a place that looked as though it were a place of prayer. While I was on a mission trip in Zimbabwe back in 2015 there was a beautiful church up on a hill. Now it might not seem beautiful like a cathedral, or a place with large halls and many classrooms, ivory and gold trim were not present. But it was beautiful nonetheless because it was hand built with love, had white walls and dark floors and pews and large windows with window glass. The village people were in the midst of building an administrative center with rooms for missionary visitors but only the foundation had been partially constructed. It takes years to actually build a building in Zimbabwe because of lack of time for the townspeople to work on the building, lack of funds to purchase the materials needed, and the right weather to work in. What was most intriguing about this village was the place of prayer.

Up on this stone hill, which was very rounded and smoothed by the wind and rain, there was a place that was not easy to access. After climbing all the stone stairs to the church, we had to follow a narrow path that wound around behind the church and had a drop off on the open side. The view from there was amazing. We could see for miles, out over what was once a flood zone but now was controlled by the newly built dam. However, there was a malfunctioning component to the dam, and it didn't work as it was supposed to work. That was where the people used to go to get their water, about a 2 hour trip one way on foot of course, before the bore hole was drilled and they had a freshwater well. It was a breathtaking view.

Once we rounded the back corner of the church building there was a wide flat smooth piece of rock, about the size of our church narthex. That was where the women of the village gathered every morning for prayer before the start of the day. I can just imagine them down on their knees in their colorful dresses and headwraps praying out loud, breaking into song, pleading to, and praising the Lord. These African women were true believers, and their prayer space was holy.

Paul and his traveling party head for the place where women gather, near the water, because women are the ones who carry the water to their homes. When Paul and his traveling party arrived at the river they find a prayer space. I find it interesting that the women of Zimbabwe, although they were not at the very place where they used to draw their water, gather in a place where they can see their water source. Water is an important part of everyday life.

When Paul and his companions see the women, they began to engage the women in conversation. This is not customary in those times, even today a group of women may hesitate to talk to a group of men they do not know. Yet Paul is talking to them about Jesus, about God's love for all people, and how they can have new life in Christ. He isn't intimidating. And the women listen.

There happens to be a woman there who is originally from Thyatira, which is located in Asia Minor (now known as Turkey), southeast of Troas and Assos, from where the men have just come. This woman is an oddity in this time because, most likely she is a widow, but she is in control of her fabric business and has some status in this community. Lydia believes in God and after hearing the men speak

of Jesus, she becomes a believer in Jesus. She and her household are baptized, it wasn't uncommon for the head of the household to make decisions for all the people who lived in their home. Her home must have been rather large because she invites Paul and his companions to stay with her while they are in Philippi. Even though we see this as an amazing show of hospitality it would be a common action in the middle east in those days to invite the stranger to stay with you, at the very least to offer them food and drink. From this invitation Lydia's home becomes the first house church.

Did you know that before COVID house churches were catching on in the States? Groups would gather in a person's home, sometimes with a pastor, sometimes with video or a Bible study and have a time of prayer and praise, a time of hearing the word of God and drawing near to one another as they discussed what they had heard and how it would impact their lives. As people invited more people to the group and it would outgrow the home, the group would break off and another house church would begin. It was a way of using old techniques to bring Jesus to people of today. And it was working! And, I found out at a retreat I attended yesterday that it is still working... the presenter's son has a house church. Every Monday evening around 25 people gather in his apartment to learn about Jesus.

We need to find a way to bring people to Jesus here at Immanuel. It's not an easy task, especially not finding young people who haven't been raised in a Christian community. I was informed a couple of months ago by one of our young people that sitting in church is boring, that sermons are boring! The person quickly backtracked and said my sermons weren't boring, but I wonder. Who among us has a grandchild they communicate with, one whom they can reach out to to find out what it is the younger people can embrace?

I've attended webinars on how to reach Generation Z. The information given was great if you have any of them attending the church, but there was no given means to draw them into the church. I only know that once they are here we need to be nonjudgmental. We need to show them that we walk the talk, that we demonstrate the values that are put forth in the Bible. That we love our neighbor. That we demonstrate what Jesus said in Matthew 25: 'for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Many times younger people are put off because in church we have this wonderful attitude and treat one another well, but outside of the church building we are just like everyone else who lives of the world. We are called to live in the world, not to act like the world.

Even so, that doesn't mean that we are to blindly accept what is going on around us if it isn't Christlike behavior. We are to speak the truth in love. Those last 2 words are the catching point, "in love". And we can't do that unless we spend time, make it a priority to spend time with God, learning to love as God loves. Allowing the fruit of the Spirit to encompass our very being: love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, and self-control. It is by our fruits that we are known. Let's begin to cultivate these fruits.

All glory be to God.