

UNLIKELY PEOPLE

**SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION
OF THE CHURCH.**



Catalog No. 20170219
Acts 16:11-40
21st Message
Andy Burnham
February 19, 2017

Acts 16:11-40

Today, as we continue our study in the book of Acts, we will be focusing on the subject of unlikely people. We will be focusing on the idea that God often chooses people who, at least in the world's eyes, might seem unlikely or ordinary. He chooses the fishermen, the tax collectors, and the prostitutes, the marginalized and the disenfranchised. He chooses, as it says in 1 Corinthians, "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Corinthians 1:27).

In today's passage we will be looking at three very unlikely people who were instrumental in the founding of the church at Philippi. We will be looking at the stories of a Gentile businesswoman, a demon-possessed slave girl, and a Roman prison guard, all of whom were highly unlikely candidates for any great undertaking, especially within the culture of their day.

As we look at these three stories, I hope God will use them to encourage anyone here who might be feeling unlikely or ordinary. I hope God will use them to show you that you are precisely the kind of person he is looking for and precisely the kind of person he has always included in his glorious plan. As the old saying goes, "God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things."

Moreover, as we study today's passage, I hope God will encourage all of us never to write off anyone—never to consider anyone too unlikely to be saved or too ordinary to have a critical role in some important mission. I hope he will encourage us never to write off the homeless person, the drug addict, the psychic, or the many other people whom the world considers losers, failures, rejects, or simply too common-place, too unremarkable, to make any real difference.

As you'll recall, we are now on the second missionary journey. We are now on the second journey that Paul and his companions took as they sought to make Jesus known to a wider and wider circle of people. In this, they were, of course, fulfilling Jesus' prophetic words at the beginning of Acts when he told his disciples that they would be his

witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8). They were also fulfilling The Great Commission—Jesus' command to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in[a] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19-20).

Last week, at the beginning of Chapter 16, Paul and his friends were seeking direction. They were seeking God's will about what to do next. Initially, they had tried heading into the Roman province of Asia (in the south-western part of modern Turkey), but the Holy Spirit had closed the door. They had also tried heading into Bithynia (on the edge of the Black Sea), but again the door had been closed. Sometimes God reveals his will negatively. Sometimes he reveals his will by closing doors rather than by opening them.

And yet, at the end of last week's passage, the Lord gave Paul a wonderful vision. He showed Paul a man of Macedonia begging for help. He showed Paul an incredible open door for ministry—an open door that, as we now know, would mark the beginning of a monumental new chapter in the history of Christianity. It would mark the beginning of the spread of the Gospel into Europe.

No doubt, Paul and his friends were filled with tremendous excitement and anticipation after experiencing such a clear revelation of God's will—the kind of dramatic revelation I'm sure all of us long for. In response, they quickly boarded a boat in Troas, sailed to the island of Samothrace and then to the port city of Neapolis. From there, they most likely walked nine miles along the Via Egnatia—the main Roman road in the region—arriving in Philippi, the largest city in Macedonia named after Alexander the Great's father.

Here we pick up the story, and here we meet the first of our three unlikely people: the Gentile businesswoman Lydia.

A Gentile Business Woman

Acts 16:11-15 :

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. 14 One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. 15 And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.

Paul and his companions must have been filled with excitement and anticipation, wondering what would happen upon their arrival in Philippi. They had been obedient to God’s calling, and now they stood ready and eager, waiting to see what God would do next. Would a great revival take place, like in Antioch? Would thousands come to know the Lord?

Whatever Paul and his friends may have expected, the reality was, some days passed without anything significant occurring—or at least anything significant that the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to record. It appears to have been a case of ‘hurry up and wait’. The group had traveled quickly to Macedonia only to experience a series of unnoteworthy days. They experienced a series of days with nothing dramatic happening, nothing out of the ordinary.

Often, of course, it’s that way for us as well. We enter into some exciting new chapter of life and then, contrary to our expectations, we first encounter a period of unremarkable waiting. Little of significance seems to be taking place—no skyrockets or fireworks—and we’re left simply to wonder (sometimes patiently, sometimes impatiently) how the story will unfold.

Paul and his friends not only waited and possibly wondered, but they also acted. Specifically, they began seeking people with an interest in God, people with an interest in hearing the Gospel. Since there appears

to have been no synagogue in Philippi (Paul’s usual starting point in any new city), the group went down to the Krenides River, where Jews would typically gather for prayer. By the way, since there was apparently no synagogue in Philippi, there were probably fewer than ten Jewish men in the city, which was the minimum number required for establishing a synagogue.

Indeed, upon arriving at the river, there appear to have been no Jewish men at all in the city—or at least none who had gathered to worship. Instead, there was ‘only’ a women’s prayer meeting, which, in a male-dominated society, would already have seemed like an improbable place to start a church. Women, of course, had an extremely lowly position in the first century, especially in the eyes of the Roman Empire, where they were viewed as second class citizens or even as property.

On top of that, within this unlikely gathering, Lydia—the central figure in these verses—was perhaps the most unlikely person of all. She was not a Jew but a Gentile, as her name would indicate. Also, she is referred to as a “worshiper of God,” meaning that she had not yet fully converted to Judaism. She had not yet been fully embraced into the Jewish community.

Also, Lydia was not even a native of Philippi. She was an immigrant from Thyatira (in modern Turkey), who would have been seen as a foreigner by those born and raised in Philippi. Perhaps she even spoke with an accent, further identifying her as an outsider.

To compound things further, the words “her household” indicate that Lydia was single. She may have been a widow, may have been divorced, or may never have been married. One way or the other, her singleness would have set her at a disadvantage in her male-centered world, even though she appears to have been very competent at business.

Interestingly, Paul himself appears to have had his own reservations—reservations about this non-Jewish, immigrant, single woman. The text says that Lydia had to urge him and his companions to stay at her house. The Greek word “*parabiazomai*” means “compelled” or “prevailed” It means that Lydia had to compel or prevail upon Paul, and his companions—she had to urge them contrary to what they were inclined to do.

Why did God choose such an unlikely person as Lydia to be the first convert in Philippi and the first convert in the spread of Christianity into Europe? Many good answers could be given. However, today, I’d like to

highlight one possible answer—an answer found in the words, “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.”

As you’ll recall from our study last year in the life of David, when David was chosen by God to be Israel’s next king, he was a highly unlikely candidate as well—unlikely both in the world’s eyes and even in the eyes of his own father. David was the youngest son who was left outside to tend the sheep while his father, Jesse, brought his other sons before Samuel to be considered as king. And yet, David was also the son chosen by God. He was chosen by God because, as Samuel came to understand, “...For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Outwardly, both David and Lydia were unlikely people—unlikely to be chosen for anything except complete insignificance. However, clearly, God saw them differently. He saw them according to the openness of their hearts, regardless of how they may have appeared to the world or even to their families. God saw David’s heart and God saw Lydia’s heart—hearts that were open to him—and their heart-level openness overrode everything else that was externally true about them.

The same of course applies to us, and it applies to us not merely at the moment of our salvation but also on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment, basis. Are our hearts truly and continually open to him, truly and continually willing to pay attention to what he may be saying to us? If they are, then, like David and Lydia, we will discover, perhaps to our amazement, that the Lord will do far more with our lives than we ever imagined possible. Moreover, he will do it regardless of our gender, age, education, race, culture, economic status, physical abilities, mental abilities, accent, or any other characteristic by which the world might seek to limit or disqualify us.

A Demon-Possessed Slave Girl

That is the story of the first unlikely person in our passage today—a Gentile businesswoman. Let’s move now to the second person—to an even more marginalized member of society—a demon-possessed slave girl.

Acts 16:16-24:

As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul

and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour.

19 But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. 20 And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. 21 They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” 22 The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. 23 And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. 24 Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

In reality, the girl we encounter in these verses was a double slave. She was a slave of her human masters—masters who were exploiting her for their own economic gain—and she was a slave of Satan, who was exploiting her for his own purposes as well. Indeed, when we read that the girl had a spirit of divination, the Greek word is “*puthon*”, from which we, of course, derive our English word “python.” She had “a spirit of *puthon*”, clearly intended to remind us of the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

We are not told how this girl came to be a slave—how she came either to be a slave of men and a slave of the Evil One. What we are told is that she began following Paul and his friends crying out, “These are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” She began crying out, apparently repeatedly, something that was absolutely true.

Understandably, this leads to the question: why was this a source of annoyance to Paul? Why was he bothered by someone declaring something that was absolutely true? Unfortunately, the answer is not provided in the text. However, my suspicion is that Paul’s aggravation was connected with Satan’s ability to masquerade as an angel of light, as it says in 2 Corinthians 11:14. Satan is a master of making bad things look good.

In particular, on this occasion, the devil was attempting to make one of his own followers into Paul's Public Relations person—into Paul's PR person. He was attempting to create the impression that evil and good were on the same page—that someone who was demon-possessed was actually one of Paul's associates. In short, this is an example of the proverbial wolf in sheep's clothing—an example of the wolf seeking to infiltrate the flock—and Paul of course would not allow this to happen. He would not allow anyone to imagine that he was in partnership with a demon—that he was in league with the devil--regardless of what the demon's truthful words might suggest.

Strange as it may seem, the text does not say that Paul was moved with compassion for the girl. It does not say that he cared about her, cared about either her physical bondage or her spiritual bondage. Rather, it says that he was greatly annoyed, suggesting that he was more motivated by a desire to stop the source of annoyance than by a desire to help the girl. Also, there is nothing to suggest that Paul saw this demon-possessed young woman as having any critical role in the founding of the church at Philippi. There is nothing to suggest that he saw her as a person who was likely to be used in God's plan.

Now, admittedly, the text does not specifically state that the girl was saved. It does not specifically state that she placed her faith in Jesus. And yet, it's hard to imagine that she didn't. It's hard to imagine that she wasn't like Mary Magdalene out of whom Jesus cast seven demons in Luke 8, leading her to become one of the Lord's most devoted followers. Or again, it's hard to imagine that she wasn't like the demon-possessed man in Mark 5 out of whom Jesus cast an entire legion of demons, leading him to spread the good news throughout the entire region.

One way or the other, regardless of Paul's motivation, God used an unlikely person to accomplish his own glorious purposes. He used an unlikely person to demonstrate that his power is far greater than Satan's. Indeed, sometimes God takes people who are firmly in the grip of the Evil One—people who are trapped in the occult, immersed in tarot cards, Ouija boards, crystal balls, fortune telling, and astrology—and delivers them out of the kingdom of darkness and into his own marvelous kingdom of light.

For example, I remember once being asked to visit a man in Santa Rita Jail, a man who had been part of the Church of Satan. The man even claimed to have the name 'Satan' tattooed across his stomach (although I didn't ask him to prove it to me!). He told me that

he had unsuccessfully attempted to commit suicide with an overdose of drugs and that he had then had gone to murder the drug dealer who had sold him such an ineffective dosage. Thankfully, on the way to commit murder—on the way to kill the drug dealer using a hypodermic needle filled with Drano—he was pulled over by the police and thrown in jail on an outstanding warrant.

Bottom line, I told the man that God had protected him from killing himself and had protected him from killing someone else. I told him that God wanted him to live and that God had a wonderful plan for his life. At that point, there in Santa Rita Jail, with the two of us separated by a thick piece of glass and talking to each other on telephones, we prayed, and he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior.

The lesson I believe is this—the lesson from both the life of the demon-possessed girl in our passage and from the life of the man in Santa Rita Jail—don't ever give up on anyone! God can pull people out of the deepest pit and out of the very hands of the devil himself. He can take people whom we find annoying—even people who belong to the Church of Satan--and he can do something truly miraculous. Indeed, lest we are tempted to forget, our God is a God of miracles—a God who does the seemingly impossible with the most unlikely of people. He is a God who performs miracles in the lives of people who seem hopeless--miracles against which the powers of hell will never prevail.

I believe Ray Stedman said, if Satan can't stop the spread of the Gospel through deception, he will attempt to stop it through a full-on frontal attack. Once the slave girl's owners realized that they had lost their source of income, they stirred up a riot in the city, and the riot led to Paul and Silas being beaten with rods and thrown into the innermost part of the prison. As someone said, "Wherever Paul went, there was a riot or a revival—usually both!"

A Roman Jailer

Here, in the depths of the Philippian jail, we encounter the third unlikely person in today's passage. We encounter a Roman jailer.

Acts 16:25-34:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, 26 and suddenly there

was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. 27 When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. 28 But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." 29 And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. 34 Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

Amazingly, after being beaten and thrown in jail, Paul and Silas begin praising God. They begin singing praises to the one who had allowed them to be beaten and thrown in jail—singing praises to the one who was working all things together for good even when the circumstances seemed anything but good. May God help all of us to do the same! May he help all of us to sing praises even in the darkness when we are feeling either literally or figuratively beaten, shackled, and trapped behind bars.

Here, in the darkness, with the other prisoners and the jailer listening to Paul and Silas singing praises to God, an earthquake shook the very foundations of the prison, causing the cell doors to fly open and the fetters to come unfastened. God, as we saw in Acts 5 and 12, is a master at jailbreaks, either through angels or, as here, through earthquakes!

Incredibly, with the cell doors open, the fetters unfastened, and the jailer about to commit suicide, Paul, Silas, and the other the prisoners did not seek to escape. They had the perfect opportunity to leave—the perfect opportunity to gain their freedom—yet they chose instead to stay. They chose to remain in an unlocked jail.

The question of course is why? Why did they stay when they could have left? Why did they refuse to escape when they could easily have done so? Clearly, something

more important than personal freedom must have been involved, something more important than their own self-interest, but what was it? Well... again my suspicion is that it had to do with a concept that is especially foreign to our own society—the concept of sacrificing one's own personal freedom in order to secure the freedom of someone else. It had to do with counting someone else's freedom as primary and our own freedom as secondary.

In the current case, there in the Philippian jail, we begin to see a beautiful irony. We begin to see that God allowed Paul and Silas to become physically imprisoned so that the jailer might be set spiritually free. We begin to see that the real prisoner in these verses—the real person in need of freedom—wasn't Paul or Silas. It was the jailer himself. Furthermore, we begin to see that Paul and Silas needed to remain physically imprisoned in order for their captor's 'spiritual jailbreak' to occur. Had Paul and Silas run away—had they sought their own personal freedom—the jailer would have committed suicide and never been saved. He would never have been set free from the spiritual bondage he had known his entire life.

Proclaiming liberty to the captives—freedom to prisoners like the Roman jailer—is at the heart of the Gospel. It is at the heart of why Jesus came into the world, and it continues to be at the heart of what Jesus is doing today through his church—through all those in whom Jesus has come to dwell. The Lord takes the captives and prisoners—those who long to be free,—and he flings open the prison doors to a whole new life, a whole new unshackled way of living. As Jesus himself declared when he was in the synagogue in Nazareth: , reading from Isaiah 61:1-2a: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19).

In response to the jailer's questions: "What must I do to be saved?" and "What must I do to be set free from the prison that my life has always been?," Paul gives a staggeringly simple answer. He simply says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." Undoubtedly, as we can see from what follows, those uncomplicated words shook the jailer's life far more powerfully than the earthquake. They shook his life to its foundations, flinging open the prison doors, the shackles of sin and self, that had always kept him bound, always kept him behind spiritual bars.

As evidence of his new life—his new life of freedom in Christ—the jailer took Paul and Silas home, bathed their wounds, and fed them. The same hands, as Steve Zeisler observed, that had put on the shackles now wash the wounds. The hands that had brought pain now serve a nourishing meal. It's an incredible story of transformation—a story that was almost certainly instrumental in drawing the jailer's entire family to faith.

All the people we've looked at this morning—Lydia, the demon-possessed slave girl, and the Roman jailer—would, at least in the world's eyes, have seemed highly unlikely to play an important role in any significant undertaking. They would have seemed highly unlikely to be people we would be reading about today, thousands of years later and thousands of miles from Philippi. And yet, as I hope has become increasingly clear, they are exactly the type of people the Lord chooses. They are exactly the type of people through whom the Lord can demonstrate his incredible grace, mercy, power, and love.

Now, before we look at the application of these three stories, let me comment briefly on the subsequent verses—verses that form an important epilogue to the account of the founding of Philippian church.

Acts 16:35-40:

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." 36 And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore come out now and go in peace." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out." 38 The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. 39 So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.

Again, there is a beautiful sense of irony and reversal in these verses. The magistrates had accused Paul and Silas of wrongdoing, but now they themselves stand

accused. The supposedly guilty are revealed to be innocent, and the supposedly innocent are revealed to be guilty. A complete reversal has taken place—a reversal perhaps orchestrated by the Lord in order to provide safety for the newly planted church.

After this point in the story, no further action is taken against the believers in Philippi--or at least no further action recorded in the book of Acts. There were no more riots, no more beatings, no more imprisonments. The magistrates were fearful and apologetic and appear to have left the church alone for a season. A beachhead had been established, even though, as we know from Paul's letter to the Philippians, written 10-12 years later, new attacks would eventually arise (Philippians 1:27-30).

Conclusion

My hope and prayer is that God will use these three stories to encourage any of you who might be feeling unlikely or ordinary. You are the very people God has always chosen and always used to accomplish his purposes. You are the very people through whom the Lord can reveal himself to a lost, broken, and hurting world that desperately needs him. The Lord wants to make himself known to the world through people whom the world has discounted and rejected, just as he himself was discounted and rejected. He wants to make himself known through the Lydias, the slave girls, the jailers, and through ordinary people like so many of us.

I hope and pray too that the Lord will help all of us never to discount or reject anyone—or, if we have been discounting and rejecting anyone, may he help us to stop. May he help us not to look at anyone as being too unlikely or too ordinary to be saved or to be used by him in a powerful way. May he help us not to evaluate people by outward appearances or by the yardsticks of this fallen world, but may we genuinely see people as Jesus sees them—see them through the eyes of love: bearing all things, believing all things, hoping all things, enduring all things.

“Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen” (Ephesians 3:20-21).