

"Together in Ministry"
(Acts 16: 9-15)
May 22, 2022

“Come and stay at my home.” Is that something still possible nowadays?

Paul experienced this extraordinary and unexpected invitation when he was on his second missionary trip. This trip was different from the previous one. Here’s a map of Paul’s first missionary trip, which started from Antioch. If you follow the blue line, you can see that he travelled to Cyprus, Pamphylia, the southern part of Galatia, and then the red line to return to Antioch. It didn’t cover a lot of places, but had a great success among the Jewish Christians. When Paul planned his second trip, a lot of things changed. Initially, Paul planned to go with Barnabas since Barnabas had been accommodating in the past. He introduced Paul to the apostles in Jerusalem, to the church in Antioch, brought gifts with him from Antioch to Jerusalem, worked together in the first missionary journey, and announced to the Jewish Christians their mission of bringing the gospel to the Gentiles. (Acts 13:46) However, they couldn’t agree to bring John-Mark with them (Acts 15:37-39). So, Paul and Barnabas could not be together on the second trip. Paul had to pick Silas as his partner, picked up Timothy with them on the way. And Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, probably joined them on this trip too.

These four men formed a strong team. Paul was a well-educated person who knew the Jewish and the Hellenistic culture inside out. Silas was a prophet having a good connection with the Jewish Christians. Timothy, whose father was a Greek, was a bridge between the two cultures. Paul circumcised him so that the Jews could hear from them without obstructing their missionary plan to Gentiles.

And Luke the doctor (Colossians 4:14) could look after their physical well-being on the trip.

So, did all things happen according to their plan? No! They tried to enter Bithynia, but God wanted Paul to change his plan. Paul saw a vision, in which a man of Macedonia, a part of Greece in Gentile territory, begged Paul to come over to Macedonia to help. The team responded quickly and got ready to leave for Macedonia immediately. So they went to Troas, set sail from there to Samothrace, to Neapolis, and then to Philippi.

The request of the Macedonia man made them cross over to a new part of the world. When Paul and his companion arrived there, he wanted to do what he used to do, to find a synagogue. As mentioned before, the Jewish Christians saw themselves as a liberal group within Judaism. Paul wanted to find a place men gathered so that he could talk to them. Apparently, there were not enough males in the city to form a synagogue. In that case, should they stop? Maybe they should. A request in a vision. Maybe it's only a dream. Maybe it's just another mistake. But Paul didn't stop looking. They found an unexpected place of prayer outside the gate by the river where some women got together. We know the function of the city gate. It's the entry and exit of the city wall built to protect the people living inside from the threats from outside. The place Paul and his companion found was unsafe. And the persons they found there were not males but females of unknown backgrounds. If Paul took safety seriously, he wouldn't go there. If Paul cared about the custom, he wouldn't speak directly to these women. By the way, the request in the vision was made by a man. Who would expect to find and talk to these women? However, all these happened because

Paul and his companions did the ministry together by crossing the boundaries and entering an unknown and potentially dangerous territories.

When I search on the internet with the question, “How to deal with strangers?” The answer I got was that “If a stranger approaches you, seek help immediately.” Then I noticed a few words and expressions popped up more than once, “Trust your instincts,” “If you feel you are being followed,” “if you feel something is not right,” “buddy system”, and “avoid walking anywhere alone.” If we believe that the society we support and live in is safe, these words and expressions remind us of the reality hidden on a deeper level. We know we must draw the line when it comes to some issues. When you hear someone says, “It’s nothing personal,” you know you will listen to something unpleasant, and it might hurt you intentionally or unintentionally. When you hear someone says, “This is off the record,” you know there’s something that might come back and haunt you. Is there anything on earth that we can trust then? We can’t put our trust in politics, represented by the world leaders, our federal government, our provincial and municipal government. We can’t put our trust in religions, represented by different religious leaders, denominations, and beliefs that are too close to rationalism at one end, and superstitions at the other. We can’t even trust our relatives, families, or even ourselves.

Lydia was identified as a God-fearer, a worshiper of God, a Gentile sympathetic with the Jewish faith, but who was not a formal convert to Judaism. Why was she so attracted to Judaism? The scripture didn’t elaborate further. The formal emphasis of Judaism is to segregate oneself from sins, uncleanness, sick people especially the lepers. However, in real-life situations, do you think one can

strictly observe the rules. Would one save a sheep when it falls into a pit on the Sabbath? Would the family stop treating the one who does that as a family member? It was a fact that the lepers would be removed from the cities. Do you think their family members would stop giving them food and other supplies if they could afford to do so? Judaism was well known for taking care of the widows, the poor, and the vulnerable. Dorcas, whom we talked about two weeks ago, was famous for doing that. What might attract Lydia to pray to God?

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” God was ahead of Paul, ahead of Lydia, and ahead of all of us. The Holy Spirit opened Lydia’s heart. She was well prepared. Whether Paul was a magnificent speaker or preacher was not significant. The harvest was ready, and the time was right.

“Come and stay at my home,” said Lydia. Lydia had a “household”, which would include family, servants, and other retainers. Even though she was presented as wealthy and respected, she was an outsider. An outsider of Judaism, a God-fearer; an outsider among the Gentiles, the head of a household in a patriarchal society; and an outsider of the city people, who prayed outside the city gate with other females, where anything could happen.

Paul dared to step into an unsafe place and talked to some unfamiliar women. Can we afford to do the same, being the sounding board for the homeless, those who are deprived of personal contact, freedom of speech, freedom to be themselves, and freedom of choices? It’s the Holy Spirit’s power, not ours, that opens hearts. We sometimes need to be reminded of this when we talk about “our” ministry, especially when we see any success. We should always remember

with gratitude and trust that it is enough for us “to be there,” and “don’t screw it up.”

Lydia is an excellent reminder to us that God’s grace crosses all economic boundaries, God cares for the poor and the ones who had sufficient resources. Success or failure is not our responsibility but God’s. We only need to cross boundaries with open arms. To fling wide the gates of our cities, churches, and hearts. But we need to do it together. There are liability issues, and there’re traps everywhere. We need to be wise like serpents, and innocent as doves. We need each other in the ministry. Amen.