

Acts 16:9 -15

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell

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Lydia's Listening Heart: When God Opens the Door

There's a moment in the Book of Acts where a detour changes everything.

Paul has a vision one night of a man from Macedonia pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." It's vivid, compelling, unmistakable. So Paul sets sail immediately with his companions. This was not the original plan. They had tried to go to Asia. They had tried to go to Bithynia. But the Spirit kept blocking their way. Finally, they wind up in Philippi, a leading city in the district of Macedonia. And what they find there is not a man, but a woman. Lydia. A merchant. A worshiper of God. A woman gathered with others down by the river.

And it is through her — not a prominent man, not a religious leader, not a Roman official — that the gospel takes root in Europe.

It's a reminder that God's way of changing the world doesn't usually follow the map we expected. Sometimes the vision comes in a dream, and then the fulfillment shows up in the form of someone we didn't plan on meeting. Sometimes the biggest shifts in history start with a conversation by the water.

There is something subversively beautiful about that.

Point One: The Spirit Leads Through Closed Doors

Paul's journey to Macedonia begins with frustration. We're told twice that they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit" to go where they had planned. Isn't that fascinating?

The Spirit didn't just inspire movement. It obstructed it. It said no.

Most of us don't love being told no. We don't like closed doors. But in Acts, the closed doors are not a failure of discernment. They are part of the discernment.

Sometimes, the "no" is holy. Sometimes, the "no" leads to the very place where grace is waiting.

The hardest part of being a pastor? Telling people I'm a pastor.

I could be chatting with someone on a plane — at a party, or while wandering through a museum on vacation — just two humans connecting. And then it happens. The dreaded question: "So, what do you do for a living?"

“I’m a pastor.”

Cue the silence. Conversation buzzkill. Suddenly they’re apologizing for swearing five minutes ago. I can see the gears turning as they mentally rewind everything they said, trying to remember if they accidentally confessed a crime.

But here’s what I consider a real compliment: when they say, “Wait. You’re a pastor? That’s the last thing I thought you were going to say.” To which I always respond: “Maybe that’s because I never wanted to be one in the first place.”

And yet ... here I am.

I used to dream of being a sports broadcaster — still pretty sure I’d crush it. But during college, as I got more involved in ministry, I found myself praying, “Oh no, Lord. You’re not gonna make me a pastor, right? That’s a weird job, and pastors are weird people!”

I tried to say no again in 2022. But then Stone Church came knocking in spring of 2024, and I said yes. Again.

I still can’t believe I’m a pastor, but God’s “no” to my plans led me to a life full of meaning, surprises, and joy (and yes, some sheep bites along the way).

What if the roadblocks in your life are not detours but directions? What if the closed door is actually a holy nudge?

Some of us have seen enough life to know that some of the best things happened because the thing you hoped for didn’t. The job you didn’t get, the relationship that ended, the dream that fell through. Still, God was there. You carry the stories of God’s “no” making way for something better.

To those of us in transition or uncertainty, this passage gives us a kind of spiritual permission: we don’t have to have it all figured out. Paul didn’t. He just stayed open.

He kept moving. He listened.

That is sometimes the holiest thing we can do: keep listening.

Point Two: God Chooses the Unexpected Center

When Paul finally gets to Philippi, he doesn’t find a synagogue, because there likely weren’t enough Jewish men in the city to form one. Instead, he hears that a group of

women gather outside the city gate by the river for prayer. So that's where he goes. It's there he meets Lydia.

Let's pause on who Lydia is.

Lydia isn't a passive convert. She's already a worshiper of God, a leader with agency. She deals in luxury goods, likely wealthy and respected, and heads her household. When she hears Paul, she listens deeply. Her leadership begins not with power, but with presence. She doesn't dominate; she receives. She shows us that true spiritual leadership isn't about titles or control. It's about attentiveness, discernment, and the willingness to be transformed.

Verse 14 says, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." That word "opened" is key. Lydia didn't just have a good business mind. She had an open heart. And that made all the difference.

She becomes the first documented convert to Christianity in Europe. And her home becomes the church.

Not a temple. Not a synagogue. Her *home*. That's where the gospel takes root.

If we were writing this story from a position of power, we might have picked a Roman governor. A priest. A man with credentials. But God chooses Lydia. A Gentile woman. A survivor in a patriarchal culture. A business owner. A prayerful heart. That's who becomes the vessel for this movement.

The Spirit is still doing this. Still raising up unexpected people to carry the good news forward.

Who is Lydia among us today? Maybe she is the immigrant entrepreneur. The matriarch who funds the food pantry. The queer person whose faith has survived exclusion. The retiree who opens their living room to neighbors. The caregiver who sits at the bedside in silence and prayer.

I can tell you, there are a lot of Lydia's in this church.

God is still building the church through homes, hospitality, and hearts like Lydia's. And here's a deeper question: Are we willing to be surprised by who God chooses? Are we ready to see leadership and faithfulness in places we weren't looking? Because if Lydia teaches us anything, it's that God doesn't always choose the obvious candidate. God chooses the one whose heart is open.

Point Three: Hospitality as Holy Ground

Lydia doesn't just get baptized and say thank you. She insists: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And the text says, "She prevailed upon us." The phrase "nevertheless, she persisted" comes to mind. Hospitality isn't an afterthought for Lydia. It is central to her discipleship.

I once dated a Cuban immigrant (I ended up marrying her) whose home felt like holy ground. Terely's mother led with such fierce hospitality. If someone knocked at 11:30 p.m., it didn't matter. The door opened. Coffee brewed. A meal appeared. No one was turned away. With the caveat that it disrupted my romantic program for the night (!), that immigrant home taught me more about the gospel than most sermons ever did. Because for my mother-in-law, and for Lydia, hospitality was a spiritual practice.

In a time when public Christianity is often associated with control, exclusion, and gatekeeping, Lydia reminds us that at its best, Christianity looks like an open door. A basin of water. A shared table. A heart that listens. A home that makes space for others to belong.

Let me leave you with this: The gospel didn't come to Europe through a grand strategy or powerful sermon alone. It came through a riverside encounter, a woman who listened deeply, and the courageous hospitality of Lydia. *She* became the doorway.

So here's the question: What kind of doorway are you?

Are you open to the Spirit's nudge, even when it shows up off your carefully planned path?

Are you willing to make space for conversation, for strangers, for a new thing God is doing?

Maybe that's the gospel for us today: that even when we feel detoured, tired, or unseen, God is still opening hearts. Still showing up in quiet places. Still birthing the church in unexpected homes,—through listening, through welcome, through us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.