

In the Name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Intro

Where are we being called to go as a Church?

That's a question that Christians have been wrestling with for 2,000 years.

That's the question facing the Disciples in our Gospel reading.

That's the question facing Paul as he journeys to Macedonia.

And it's a question we continue to wrestle with today.

I. Gospel

A. Our Gospel reading, like last week's, comes from what scholars call Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" at the Last Supper.

1. Last week, we heard Jesus give his Disciples his New Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you."
2. And now he teaches them how to live out this new commandment.
3. Jesus says, "Those who love me will keep my word ..."
4. In John's Gospel the word LOVE rarely stands alone – it is usually followed by some kind of "**doing**" word, and in this case it is to "keep Jesus' word."
5. And by keeping his word, Jesus means to continue to live into the self-giving love that he has lived.
6. Jesus then goes on to try and explain that his presence will continue with them – even as he is soon to leave them.

B. Even though they can't understand it now, Jesus promises that his coming departure will not be the end of his fellowship with his disciples.

1. He then goes on to explain that he must LEAVE them, in order to RETURN to them in a new and empowering way.

2. As one scholar puts it, "*Jesus will be released from earthly limitations through the Cross and Resurrection so that his Divine presence will dwell with them always.*" (Synthesis May 1, 2016)

3. That's why he tells them not to "let their hearts be troubled"

4. Rather than be overwhelmed with grief, Jesus tells them to rejoice because he is returning to the Father and will be with them in new and more powerful ways than they can understand.

5. To quote our scholar again, "*His mission to bring Abba's love to the world has been accomplished, and now the Advocate will be with them in this new era.*" (Synthesis)

C. This Advocate Jesus promises is the Holy Spirit who will come in his name, and will teach the Disciples everything they need to know, and remind them of all Jesus has taught and said.

1. It is the Holy Spirit who will be their Advocate and Guide to act as counselor, helper, comforter, and much, much more – to teach them everything when Jesus is no longer with them.

2. With the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Disciples will be equipped to proclaim all that Jesus taught and did to bring God's love to the world.

3. But it's not enough simply to HAVE the Holy Spirit, the Disciples are told that they have to be OPEN and LISTEN.

4. They, and WE, have to be OPEN and LISTEN for the Spirit's guidance for the ways in which WE are called to bring God's love to the world.

II. Be like Lydia

A. We can see all this put into action in our reading from Acts.

1. Paul is being OPEN and LISTENING to the Holy Spirit as he is **guided**, through a vision, to go to the Roman Colony of **Macedonia**.
2. Paul's vision and subsequent journey to **Macedonia** reminds me of a recent article I read on-line of another faithful woman there.
3. It seems that Sister Maria Cyrilla is the last remaining member of the Order of the Perpetual Watch, in the convent of St. Elias, in a small Macedonia village.
4. She is the last caretaker of this site of significant historic developments spanning more than 2,000 years.
5. When Sister Maria dies, the convent will be closed by the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch of Macedonia.
6. However, that isn't likely to happen soon as Sister Maria, 53, enjoys excellent health.
7. By her own estimate, she walks 10 miles daily about the grounds of the convent, which once served as a base for the army of Attila the Hun.
8. In more ancient times, a Greek temple to Eros, the god of love, occupied the hilltop site.
9. Historians say that Attila took over the old temple in 439 A.D. and used it as a base for his marauding army.
10. The Huns are believed to have first collected and then destroyed a large gathering of Greek legal writs at the site.
11. It is believed that Attila wanted to study the Greek legal system, and had the writs and other documents brought to the temple.
12. Scholars differ on why he had the valuable documents destroyed – either because he was barely literate or couldn't read them, or because they provided evidence of democratic government that did not square with his own notion of rule by an all-powerful tyrant.

13. When the Greek Church took over the site in the 15th Century and the convent was built, church leaders ordered the pagan statue of Eros destroyed, so another ancient Greek treasure was lost.

14. Today, there is only the lone sister, watching over the old Hun base.

15. And that's how it ends: No Huns, no writs, no Eros, and nun left on base – sorry, I couldn't resist.

B. But it is not Sister Maria Cyrilla who Paul meets in Macedonia, but other women, particularly one named **Lydia**.

1. And so in our Acts Lesson, we hear of Paul and his party, including Luke – some scholars believe – making their way to Macedonia and arriving in the City of Philippi, in modern day Greece.

2. On the Sabbath, Paul, following his usual pattern, seeks for a “place of prayer” – that he might begin to share his message.

3. Being a Roman colony there wasn't a synagogue or any permanent place of prayer, but in cities where that was the case, the Jews would often congregate near water.

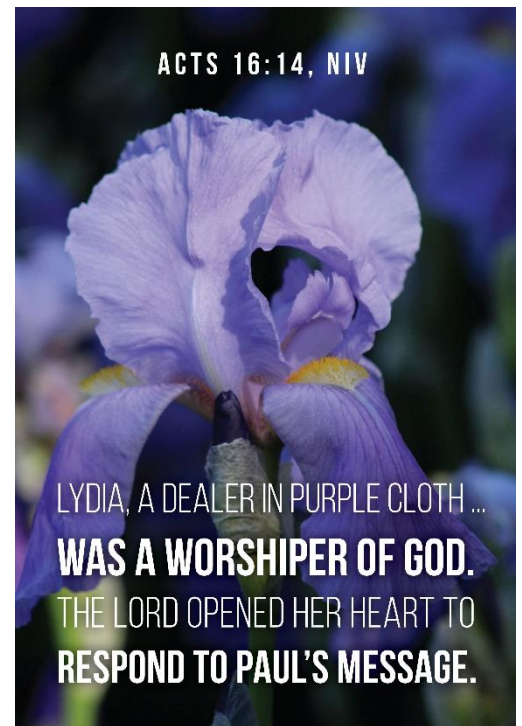
4. And so Paul goes to the river outside the gates of the city, and begins to talk to the women who are gathered there.

5. Among those who were there was a woman named **Lydia**.

6. We are told that she is a “worshipper of God” – so either a faithful Jew or a very devout Gentile;

- and she is a “dealer in purple cloth.”

7. Now, only the wealthy could afford to wear purple cloth;



- the dye used to create the purple cloth had to be gathered drop by drop from certain shell-fish and was so costly that to dye a pound of wool with it would cost in the neighborhood of \$500.

8. So to be the owner of such a business would mean **Lydia** was a woman of means.

9. And when **Lydia** heard Paul's message of the love of God in Jesus, she became a believer; and she **and her whole household** were baptized.

C. Now it's interesting to note three things about **Lydia**.

1. First, just as we heard last week about **Cornelius** who was the first Gentile convert – **Lydia** is the first EUROPEAN convert – as the church has now spread from Jerusalem to Antioch, then across Asia Minor, and now to Europe.

2. The second is that **Lydia** is a woman.

3. The commentators don't seem to make a big deal about this; in fact, Luke just jumps to Paul talking to a gathering of women, but that's not his usual practice.

4. Paul usually will go to a synagogue and talk with the men – until he gets tossed out – and then forms a community in someone's home, and goes on from there.

5. But, as we have seen, there is no Synagogue, and at the "place of prayer" it is to a group of women that Paul speaks, and they believe.

6. It is obvious that **Lydia** is a woman of influence and power, and was no doubt a mainstay of the early church and certainly the church in Philippi – that probably met in her house

– a church to whom we also have a letter by Paul (Philippians)

– so this is a story that explains how the wonderful **Lydia** became a Christian, and how the Church in Philippi began, and Luke isn't worried about much else.

D. And the third and most important thing about **Lydia** is her response to what she hears from Paul.

1. **Lydia** too is OPEN and LISTENS, and then RESPONDS.

2. She responds as she and her entire household are baptized.

3 And she responds by inviting Paul to stay at her house – not just overnight – she opens her home to Paul to make it his base of operations.

4. Through her acts of generosity, **Lydia** becomes a model for how a Christian should live in the world – and through her hospitality, her home becomes the gathering place of the Church in Philippi.

5. **Lydia** has no problem answering the question, “Where are we being called to go as a Church?”

III. Where are we being called to go as a Church?

A. So from our readings we see how the early church began to form and what it was based on.

1. We see from the Gospel that it is based on keeping Jesus’ WORD – and bringing Jesus’ LOVE to the world.

2. We also see that it requires being OPEN and LISTENING to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

3. And we learn from **Lydia** that it practices hospitality and is an open and loving community.

4. But what does that mean to US as we strive to answer this question for our day and time?

5. Where are we being called to go as a Church?

6. That will be the QUESTION OF THE HOUR in the coming weeks and months as you begin the process of looking for a new priest.

B. It is an important question, and one that deserves your prayerful consideration.

1. Your Vestry is already at work beginning this process, and has formed two committees to begin this work.

2. One is the **Transition Committee** to create a parish profile, to help say who St. Columba's is NOW and what are the gifts and skills that are needed in the next priest to come.

3. And the other is the **Search Committee** who will take this information and begin the task of narrowing the applicants and recommend a group of finalists to the Vestry.



4. But this is not just their work alone – it is going to take **ALL** of you working together, **PRAYING** together, to help in the work of calling a new priest to come be among you.

5. Ponder: Who you want to be as a Church?

- What do you want to be known for in the community?
- What kind of gifts and skills will the next priest need to have to help you to achieve those goals?

6. And then during the transition period, you will need to be like **Lydia** and the church in Philippi – working to be a church based on **keeping Jesus' word** – continuing to live into the self-giving love that Jesus lived – and being **open to the Spirit** – while practicing **hospitality and openness to all**?

Conclusion

This work cannot be done on your own – you will need to continue to be open, listening, and responding to the guidance of the Holy Spirit that Jesus sends to be our counselor, helper, comforter, and guide to teach us everything.

And with God's help you will be able to accomplish great and wonderful things, now and in the years to come.

Let Us Pray

Filled with your Holy Spirit, gracious God, your disciple Lydia served you with the gifts that had been given her of hospitality, business and stewardship. Inspire us today to build up your Church with our gifts of hospitality, charity

and bold witness to the Gospel of Christ; who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

(Holy Women Holy Men p 193 – adapted)

