

Spiritual Direction

John 14:23-29

Acts 16:9-15

One of the things that has mystified me in recent years is the exploding popularity of conservative churches. For the past couple of decades or so, the banner of freedom has been waved around, sometimes in opposition to our own government, sometimes in opposition to the perceived threats of others. But during that same period of time people have been flocking to churches that significantly restrict their freedom. True, they don't have rules or laws, but some of them do have plenty of shoulds and oughts, and even more shouldn'ts. It's ironic – people don't want their government telling them what they can and can't say in a public forum, or taking a percentage of their money from them for roads and schools and health care and the military, but in a different arena they are perfectly willingly to believe what they are told to believe, disapprove of the things they are told to disapprove of, and vote the way they are told they should vote.

Here is what I think about that: I think people really don't want the freedom they say they do. Some freedom, yes, but not too much. Child development experts tell us that children like parameters, limits, and to know what is and isn't expected of them; but after pondering this for a number of years and after countless conversations as a pastor, I think everyone does. We may not want our government telling us what we can and can't do, what we should and shouldn't do, but we want someone to. When you get right down to it, we really don't want a wide-open glut of choices; we don't want to be inundated with decisions every waking moment of our lives. We talk about freedom, but look at the things we cling to: our roots to tell us who we are so we aren't constantly having to figure that out for ourselves; the comfort of traditions to tell us the 'right' way to do something; the idea of a shepherd, someone to lead us. We don't want to be controlled, but we also don't want to be completely adrift, always wondering if we are doing the right thing, headed the right way.

A lot of you know I've had numbness in my right hand for about six months now and I went to a neurosurgeon this week to talk about whether or not I needed surgery. It's a new day and age now, going to the doctor, isn't it? He told me he thought it would probably be a good idea if I did it, but since I wasn't having pain it wasn't a medical necessity right now, but of course if I was in an accident there was a chance I could end up paralyzed, but it really was elective at this point, so it was up to me. "I have a degree in home economics!" I wanted to say to him. "You're the neurosurgeon; don't make me decide – tell me what I should do!" I wanted someone who was wiser and more knowledgeable about the risks and benefits to direct me, to give me a good, strong push in the right direction.

Isn't that what everyone wants? Not ultimate freedom, but someone who is far wiser than we are, who can tell us whether or not we would end up regretting it if we go in this direction, or if going down that path is going to make our life so much richer and better than it is now, even if that path won't be without some risks and pain along the way?

Every other time I've preached on this story in Acts I've jumped straight to Lydia – hopefully an understandable and forgivable impulsiveness for a female preacher. But this time what I'd like

to suggest is that Lydia isn't, in fact, the most intriguing character in this story. And neither is Paul. The primary act-er in this story is the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is doing the very thing that we have just said we all want to have someone do for us. Or in Paul's case, **to** us. The Spirit is directing Paul, nudging him in the right direction.

In today's story he has just come from what I believe is the first church-wide gathering, and not surprisingly or coincidentally, the first church-wide fight: should these new Gentile converts to the faith be circumcised? You can say anything you want about the fierce debates around some of the most heated arguments in the church these days, but I can promise you that none of them were taken more personally than that one!

So, anyway, the council meeting wraps up, and Paul and his traveling companions decide it's time to get back on the road and back to the work that God has called him to do: taking the gospel to the Gentile world. But look – Philippi, where they encountered Lydia, isn't where they were headed. They weren't even headed to Macedonia (present-day Greece). They were headed across the Black Sea and into Asia. Plenty of Gentiles there. But Luke writes that they were prevented from going by the Holy Spirit. Doesn't say how, but somehow it was made clear to them that that wasn't what they were supposed to do. So then they try to go to Bythnia, on the southern coast of the Black Sea, but again the Spirit stops them in their tracks, and turns them around in the other direction. It was there, at Troas, that Paul has his vision, a man begging them to come to Macedonia to help them out. And so, instead of crossing the Black Sea, they get in their boat and cross the Aegean Sea to present-day Greece. And that's how they end up in Philippi. Two divinely prompted 'no's and a 'yes'.

I know that for some here, that's just the assurance that you need to hear today; that God doesn't leave you floundering in life, setting high expectations for you, but then leaving you to make out as best you can on your own. Which job to take, or what to do when there is no job? Good luck with that! Looking for a life partner? You're on your own there! Choose wisely. Not sure if now's the time to retire? Hope you make the right choice! What to do about your kid? That's a toughie.

God doesn't do that. In the gospel reading this morning Jesus promises his disciples that when he leaves, his Spirit will come and make its home in their hearts. It will be there to comfort, to encourage, to teach, and yes, to direct them. To shepherd them where they are supposed to go. To help them when they aren't sure which way to turn. Sometimes by steering, sometimes by interfering.

That promise does come with a warning label, though. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

First, even though God's not averse to using the stick to get us where we are supposed to go, quiet, gentle nudges are his usual M.O. Unless you cultivate your openness to hearing him, chances are you will talk right through his whispered answer, or you'll be so busy trying to manage your life yourself that you'll completely miss the messenger that gets sent to you. If you are going to ask for help, if you're going to seek out the guidance of the Spirit, then work at becoming attentive to God's subtle answers. It may come in the form of a flat tire that stops you in your tracks, or a dream that grabs your attention, maybe in the words of a friend, or even the

words of someone you don't think much of at all. Maybe the direction you need will come in the guise of a job that gets whisked out from under you.

Second, remember that the reason God guides and directs us isn't just to keep us from making mistakes or to keep us on the path of success and good fortune. The Spirit doesn't dwell in our hearts just to function as some divine Ouija board: should I open a restaurant ,yes or no? God directs us so that we can serve his purposes and glorify him. God wasn't directing Paul to Philippi because he knew that he would be safe from persecution there. He sent him there because they needed to hear the gospel on European soil. Why is God directing you to go a certain way, a new direction? What purpose does God have for you there? How will God be served?

And, finally...seeking God's guidance and direction may not be for you if you like to play it safe, if adventure and excitement and creativity and the unexpected just aren't for you.

Paul had a routine he followed each time he went to a new town on his journeys. They'd unpack their bags, cruise around the city a bit, check things out, and then on the Sabbath he would go to the synagogue and teach there. But that's not what he did in Philippi. Instead of going to the synagogue on the Sabbath, they went outside the city gates, looking for a place they had a hunch might be a place of prayer. Just a fluke? Maybe. But because Paul seems to be something of a creature of habit, and going outside the gates looking for people who might be open to hearing the gospel seems like an unlikely thing to do, I'd be inclined to think that it was perhaps at the leading of the Spirit that they did that. And who did they encounter there? Another surprise: women. Including one woman named Lydia, a wealthy, independent business woman, who was also quite open to God's nudging.

And I love what Lydia does when she is moved to belief, again by the Spirit's prompting, and is baptized – she opens her home up to Paul and his companions. She offers him hospitality. Isn't that a metaphor for both of our readings today? She offers them literal hospitality, but what Jesus is talking about is offering God hospitality. Making room in our souls for the Spirit to settle in, being attentive and gracious and welcoming. All the things a good host does.

God doesn't leave us alone to face a bewildering array of choices and problems alone, to figure things out for ourselves. The Spirit is always there, ready to guide and shepherd us through life. We just have to be open to it. We have to be good hosts.