



TOUCH POINT

## The Book of Acts: A Stretching Exercise – Touchpoint for May 18, 2022

**Acts 16:6-15 (NRSVUE)** <sup>6</sup> They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. <sup>7</sup> When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them;

<sup>8</sup> so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. <sup>9</sup> During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” <sup>10</sup> When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

<sup>11</sup> We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, <sup>12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

<sup>13</sup> On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. <sup>14</sup> A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. <sup>15</sup> When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

### **Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.**

*“On the Sabbath day, we went outside the gate by the river.”*

I never used to be very interested in the Book of Acts. It didn’t hold much appeal for me. I thought I was beyond all of that. When I was a teenager, it didn’t have lots of red letters in it like the gospels did. Those quotes of Jesus that I could throw at people to prove my point and prove them wrong... because that was the point of quoting Jesus, after all – to prove other people wrong.

When I was in seminary and after, Acts didn’t have the soaring rhetoric and deep theology of Paul’s letters. This great sense of the cosmic Christ that Paul talks about. His amazing description of the grace of God in Romans and Galatians, to name a couple.

No, Acts just seemed to me to be a story about the apostles trying to figure out what to do with this person Jesus and the experience they had of him. And they weren’t all that good at it. I mean, at times, they seemed to get it right. But a lot of the time they seemed to be bumbling and stumbling their way along, arguing amongst themselves about who is in and who is out. And sometimes they needed a vision, or a slap upside the head to straighten them out. There seemed to be so many Homer Simpson moments – Homer Simpson “D’oh” moments. Like last week when Peter went to the house of some Gentiles and ate with them and the Holy Spirit filled the room. And Peter has this great quote, “If then God gave them the same gift he gave us, WHO WAS I TO HINDER GOD?”

“D’OH!!!”

No, I never used to be very interested in the Book of Acts. It didn’t hold much appeal for me. I thought I was beyond all of that.

But lately, I’ve kind of enjoyed reading the Book of Acts. Maybe because as I get older, I can relate to the bumbling and stumbling they are doing. Maybe because I find myself being stretched more than ever in my understanding of who this person Jesus is, and who the Christ is for. And sometimes I need to be slapped upside the head because in way too many ways in my life *I HAVE HINDERED GOD!* (to quote from Peter last week).

Look, it’s not that I don’t think Jesus is the answer – I just wonder if I have been asking the wrong questions.

Like when I ask, “How do I get Jesus?” instead of asking, “Where can I meet Jesus in the other?”

Or, “How do I hold onto Jesus?” instead of, “How do I share in this Christ Mystery with others?”

Or finally, “What **would Jesus do?**” instead of, “What **is Jesus doing** and saying to me – through the poor, the forsaken, and the dispossessed in our land and on our borders?”

It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that at many times in my life, I have felt like **Christ belongs to me** rather than **I belong to Christ**.

And so our passage today from the Book of Acts brings challenge and comfort, laughter and painful self-awareness.

A little history and geography to set the scene: Paul is on the eastern side of the Aegean Sea – present-day Turkey – considered the western edge of Asia.

And Paul wants to continue going into Asia, but the Spirit of Jesus does not allow him. Paul, it seems, was headed in the wrong direction.

Paul then has a vision of a **MAN**, pleading with him to “*come to Macedonia and help us.*” So Paul goes across the Aegean Sea to Macedonia – to Europe.

They spend a few days in a city and then, on the Sabbath, they go outside the city gate and down to the river.

And there they meet **WOMEN**, and one **WOMAN** in particular. Her name is Lydia. She appears to be a non-Jew, but one who worships God. She is a successful businesswoman who apparently is the head of her household, and we all know how Paul feels about women being the head of a household.

So let me summarize all this for you.

Paul is headed in the wrong direction, until a **man** in a vision says, “*Come help me,*” and sends Paul in the right direction, and he ends up sharing the Christ with a non-Jewish, successful business**woman**, who is the head of her household.

Just keep this passage in mind when you read the last part of some of Paul’s letters.

As Homer Simpson might say, “D’OH!”

And all of this takes place outside the city gate by a river, outside polite and organized society, outside the structures and systems that we hold so dear.

Perhaps that is the only place it can take place – outside our city gates, outside our borders and boundaries, outside of everything we hold so dear.

Like Peter last week, Paul is getting stretched this week. The boundaries he has placed on God are being stretched.

How about you? Has God ever stretched your faith, your belief systems? I certainly hope so!

And so, if you've ever felt stretched in your faith journey, "Welcome to the Book of Acts!"

Where Peter, Paul – and who knows, maybe Mary too! – are constantly being stretched as they try to hammer out the love between their brothers and their sisters... all over the lands.

All of this takes place outside the city gate by a river, outside polite and organized society, outside the structures and systems that we hold so dear.

Perhaps that is the only place it can take place – outside our city gates, outside our borders and boundaries, outside of everything we hold so dear.

This is where the river runs. This is where life is fed and watered. It is not in the sacred structures and beliefs of society. It is not inside our tribal walls. It is often times on the other side of where we want to go, where we would prefer to be.

Paul has to be led to the other side of where he wants to be (Asia), to meet a person of a different faith, who holds a place in business and family life that he is not comfortable with, because he assumes she is of the subordinate gender.

And **"SHE PREVAILS"** on them at the end of this passage.

**SHE PREVAILS!!!**

A WOMAN PREVAILS OVER PAUL!!!

Are you getting this???

NO, that's not right...

**IS IT GETTING YOU???**

Do you feel yourself being stretched? Do you find yourself laughing at Paul? And yourself as well? Don't you see the absurd smallness of our social and religious belief systems?

Are you slapping your forehead and saying "D'OH!"

Welcome to the Book of Acts!!!

Just think, if these are the people the Divine Mystery is using to spread the message of love and grace to all, there just might be hope for me and you.

And even if you're not good at spreading the message, then go and meet someone outside your city gates, outside your comfort zone, and maybe they might **prevail upon you** with Christ's love and grace.

It isn't just a one-way street you know.

The Christ is **present in** – and **present to** – the bumblers and stumblers of the world.

And even if you are 'hindering God,' God's got a few work-arounds when it comes to you and me. And it usually involves those we least expect – the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned. The woman, the businesswoman, the woman who heads the house in this week's passage... and the profane people eating profane food in last week's passage. And so...

**If we're going to hinder bringing the Christ to them...  
the Divine Mystery will use them to bring the Christ to us.**

Who knows where the Christ will send us and who knows in whom we will meet the Christ.

It doesn't just stretch the imagination, it stretches one's life.

Because you see, one way or another... the Mystery, like Lydia, is going to...

**PREVAIL ON US!!!**

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D'OH!!!

**Amen.**

# *Spirit in the Desert*

## *Be Still*

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

## *You Lord Are In This Place*

(Keith Duke)

You Lord are in this place.

Your presence fills it.

Your presence is peace.

2) ...my heart, 3) ...my mind, 4) ...my life

## **Bible Passage**

*(A passage takes us from one place to another)*

## **Touchpoint**

*(Where God's story touches our life story)*

## *Shepherd Me, O God*

(Marty Haugen)

Refrain: Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears, from death into life.

- 1 God is my shepherd, so nothing shall I want, I rest in the meadows of faithfulness and love,  
I walk by the quiet waters of peace. [Refrain]
- 2 Gently you raise me and heal my weary soul, you lead me by pathways of righteousness and  
truth, my spirit shall sing the music of your name. [Refrain]
- 3 Though I should wander the valley of death, I fear no evil, for you are at my side,  
your rod and your staff, my comfort and my hope. [Refrain]
- 4 You have set me a banquet of love in the face of hatred, crowning me with love beyond my  
power to hold. [Refrain]
- 5 Surely your kindness and mercy follow me all the days of my life;  
I will dwell in the house of my God forevermore. [Refrain]

## **The Meal**

### *The Lord's Prayer*

(Taize Reflections)

## **Benediction**

### *May God Keep and Bless You*

(Marty Haugen)

May God keep and bless you, and nothing distress you. May God guard and guide you and friends walk beside you. May God's arms surround you and fear not confound you. May God's light shine through you and night not subdue you. As you sleep and wake may your prayers arise as love songs for God, whose love never dies, whose love never dies.