

Setting the Stage

Acts 16:9-15

May 9, 2010; Tim Devine

St. Paul's United Church of Christ; Seattle, Washington

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But in that worship service, Jan Aerie, Executive for Mission Education and Interpretation, Wider Church and Global Ministries, shared another part of that story, by saying:

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By 1812 when four of the young men and their wives were duly commissioned and ready to sail across the sea, the ABCFM knew the funds were not sufficient to book passage. Ironically, or in divine order, the ship's sailing was delayed for several weeks. In the meantime, churches were inspired by the prospect of mission and money began to flow. But it was the women that saved the day. The women's Penny Society over twelve years had raised \$6000 – that is 600,000 pennies!! Their \$6000 was what enabled the eight to book passage on two clipper ships, fully outfitted with supplies and food and salary for one full year! We can safely say that without the women this would not have happened. For fifty years the women faithfully collected their mission pennies and, working closely with the ABCFM (men), funded many, many missionaries. Throughout that time the ABCFM (men) would not allow any woman to be sent as a missionary herself. Yet, the women didn't dwell on the fact that they were not allowed to go.

The women understood that bringing the Good News across the ocean was as important as teaching and practicing mission here at home. Since the women were mostly responsible for the faith education of the children, they firmly based their emphasis in teaching on local and global mission, and so they changed the church's view. They knew if they taught their children well, their children's generation could allow girls as well as boys to become missionaries.

There is more to that story, but for the purpose of the sermon today it took about 50 years before women were sent as missionaries in their own right. And today, 150 more years later, the executive post for Wider Church Ministries in the UCC is held by a woman.

I find that an interesting parallel to the scripture passage for today as well as it being Mother's Day. In the Book of Acts, Paul changes course and sets out in a new direction to Macedonia in present day Greece. Up until that time all of the early churches had been in the eastern Mediterranean area – present day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey. He changes course because of a dream where he is requested – by a man – to come to Macedonia. But when he and his party actually get there, the person with whom they make contact and who forms the first house church of the city is a woman – Lydia.

This same Paul – our church's namesake – who says that woman should be silent in church and subject to their husbands, gives a woman the prestige of being the first baptized convert in this new city – Philippi, and in this new region – Macedonia, and in this new continent – Europe.

So this is also a story about changing ones plans, about a still speaking God, and about creating room for the unexpected. The best of our well managed corporate policies – five year goals, strategic planning, and mission statements – all get scuttled when somebody like Paul says “sorry, I had a dream, we're going to Macedonia instead.”

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But over time this has changed. Missionaries are now not about proselytizing and paternalism, but about partnership. It isn't about the superior teaching the inferior, but about sharing resources and experiences and learning from each other.

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Of all people near and far; of all our hopes and fears;
Of all wisdom and grace:
Out of our faith, we reach out to your world.
We have made mistakes, but we have learned.
Out of our passion, we extend ourselves.
We have sown seeds of justice, love and peace
Throughout the garden of creation.
God of hope and promise,
Continue to use us as your instruments with eyes of wisdom.
Continue to use us to spread your music with ears of compassion.
Continue to use us to tend your garden with hands of humility.
God, with abundance you provide, as we continue to sow Your seeds.
Keep us grounded in mission and blooming in faith.

Amen.

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