



## Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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May 10, 2009  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter  
Acts 16:11-15  
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Acts 16:11-15  
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 67  
Second Lesson: 1 John 3:18-24  
Gospel: John 15:1-8

### **God Opens Hearts**

Hearts Hear a Simple Message  
Hearts respond in love

The writer that God used to record the Book of the Acts of the Apostles that I just read from was Luke. The same guy the Lord used to write the Gospel that bears his name. He accompanied Paul on this Second Missionary Journey. That's why you hear all these we's - "we" went here, "we" went there. You hear their road atlas and it almost sounds like you are watching a slide show. You expect to see the slides change and see the different pictures of the cities.

Luke, if you remember, was a doctor, but I doubt very much that he had ever performed open heart surgery, at least in the physical sense. When he talks about their experience there in Philippi, down by the river, he talks about open heart surgery that is being performed. Only it wasn't Luke that did it. He says it wasn't really Paul that did it. He says the Lord opened Lydia's heart through the message that Paul proclaimed. That's one of the truths that we learn. God does all the heavy lifting. He does all the work. We are simply the tool that he uses at one time or another.

God opens hearts. He opens them through a simple message, a straight forward message that Luke doesn't even bother to record for us. I guess he just assumes we know the message. Then we see that the heart that has been opened responds in love. It responds in love and in truth, as we heard in 1 John this morning, once we are connected to the vine.

Paul and Luke on the Second Missionary Journey are now on the northern part of Greece in the Macedonia region. They are there and they travel from place to place. They come to Philippi and spend a few days there. It was a Roman colony. Many of the citizens of Philippi had served in the Roman army and they were given a piece of the soil of Rome in these Roman colonies that they had put throughout the empire. The Roman citizens that lived there, many of them were retired soldiers. You get the idea that they spent some time there because the Lord gave them an open door, but you also get the idea that the city of Philippi was not necessarily a huge Jewish population center. When the Sabbath came, we are told they went down by the river. They didn't go to the synagogue. I'm assuming they didn't go to the synagogue because there was no synagogue. That is usually where Paul would start out preaching whenever he came into a city. He talked to those who knew the prophecies.

So they expect whatever Jews there might be there in Philippi, those who had come to know the God of the Jews, to be worshipping down by the river. They go to the place they think is the place of prayer and they find some women there and they talk to them. They speak a message to them. And the Lord uses that message to open Lydia's heart. The simple message is the one that our children know and it's the one that we know. God who had promised a Messiah kept that promise. When God makes a promise, he doesn't back out on it. He sent his own Son into the world to be one of us, to face everything we face, only to do it without sin, because you and I can't face it without sin. Then he carried all the sins that you and I commit day after day after day in our thoughts, our words, and our actions. He carried them to the cross and died on that cross. That pronounced forgiveness on the whole world.

Then God promised to send it to each individual's heart through the work of the Holy Spirit, through the message that is spoken, through Baptism that unites us to God. God strengthens us through his Word and through his Sacraments after he creates that faith in us. That's the message that was spoken; an ageless story that we have learned since we were real little. Maybe we learned it from our mother's bouncing us on their knees, sharing the truths, just like Timothy did from his mother and grandmother. Maybe for many of us, that's how we learned many of these stories. The simple message doesn't change. We don't need to improve on it. It is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe. We see that today as it touches Lydia's heart.

Lydia evidently had been a believer in the promise of the Messiah. She seems to be a fairly well-to-do woman, a dealer in purple cloth. Purple cloth was real expensive because the things that it took to dye purple were hard to come by and it was something that was sold only to the rich. She seems to have done fairly well because we are told that she and her whole household, which would imply servants, were baptized that day and the message touched her heart and her possible wealth or her situation in life didn't keep her from saying, "That's too simple for me." The Spirit led her to believe this glorious truth that Christ has died, Christ has risen, our sins are forgiven. It touched her and it changed her the same way it has done for each and every one of us here who believe that Jesus is our Savior. God's love is proclaimed to us. God's love touches our heart. And then, God's love flows through us in our actions.

When we are connected to that vine and we are those branches, we are branches that are to bear fruit is what Jesus said. "Fruit" doesn't mean we are supposed to act fruity or smell fruity. It means we are supposed to do the good works that are done in truth, that is according to God's will, not what we decide is good, but in love for God and in truth as we were told in 1 John. You see Lydia do this right away. She is a woman of means. She knows that these people are staying in the city and she wants to help them and says, "Come stay at my house. Come on over. We'll put you up. You can stay there." We are told that she had to persuade them. It sounds like maybe at first they were hesitant. She had to persuade them that this was how she wanted to show love for her Savior. This is something she had the means and the ability to do. It was something she could do that showed love for God. It was something she could do that

enabled the Gospel to be spread to more and more people so that they could know the joy that she felt in her heart.

The lesson for us is that when God touches our hearts, it changes us. We now have the ability not to just think that we are the sun and “all the rest of you are planets and you revolve around me.” That’s what my sinful nature wants to think. “It’s all about me. You should be taking care of me. And if you’re not taking care of me, you’re doing something wrong.” But as “little Christs,” which is what Christian means, we see that God’s love reached out to us when we were unlovable, when we had nothing that would make God desire to want us to be one with him, yet he loved us anyhow. So it leads us now to want to put the interest of others ahead of our own and show love to others.

It doesn’t mean you have to invite me over to live at your house. You already gave me a house. But if you want to have me over for pie, that’s just fine. But there are other ways you can show this love in your daily life, wherever the Lord has put you.

Wherever you are, if you’re a spouse, show love for Christ in how you deal with your spouse. If you’re a sibling, show love for Christ in how you resist the urge to poke your brother back right now. Show how you sit and behave yourself in church. Show your love for Christ in how you treat your siblings outside of church in how you love them and put their interests ahead of your own and not just find their buttons and keep pushing them over and over all day long to get them upset. Show love for God if you’re a parent, or a child, in those relationships; kids that are in school, in your relationship with your friends, workers, co-workers.

Think about it. God puts each and every one of us into countless different situations every day of our lives where we now have the opportunity to show love to him, to our friends, to our neighbors, and as we do it in love and in truth, we have the ability, because God lives in our heart, to do it out of love for Christ. That’s what our God wants us to do. That’s what he calls us to do. It doesn’t matter what situation we are in. It doesn’t have to be a church-related thing to be a fruit, a good work that is done out of love for Christ. It can be in every area of our lives, as mothers, as fathers, as children, as neighbors.

Now think about it. We, I would assume, who are here this morning, have this head knowledge that this is what our God wants us to do. I haven’t told you anything new, right? You know this. But you probably also know how often you screwed it up, haven’t you? You know how you failed in your role as a mother, or a child, or screwed up in your role as a friend or a sibling, as a spouse, as a co-worker, as an employee, as an employer.

We might have the desire to do what is right, but we don’t do it. We screw up and we hurt one another, intentionally at times, unintentionally at times, and then it’s hard. We deal with the guilt of our own sins. We deal with the pain that someone else’s sins have caused us. Forgive them? That’s hard. That’s tough. Be assured that we have been forgiven when we know maybe how we have hurt someone else? That’s tough.

That's when we need to put a little cotton in our ears so that we don't hear Satan's temptations to lead us to believe that we can't forgive someone else or we can't be forgiven, and we need to run right back to the simple message – the simple message that God loved us when we were unlovable. God didn't love us because we did things well in our service to him in all these areas. He loved us because that is his nature. When we go back to that incredibly glorious truth, we see that God forgives us no matter what we have done. That leads us to want to not just get away with more, but to love him more, to serve him more and to work at loving and forgiving others and to do better in all these different roles that God places us in. That's what he calls us to do. And you and I can't do it on our own. That's why we have to flee back to the cross. That's why we have to hang on to God's love for us, to that simple message that changes hearts, to persevere, to persuade ourselves and each other, "Yes, God loves us and has forgiven us;" to persevere and persuade each other that we are working in God's love to do better in the future, not because that will make him love us more, but because he has already loved us perfectly, absolutely and completely.

This God of grace and love will be with us. He will strengthen us so that we can do the things we don't think we can.

I suppose Paul never thought of himself as an open heart surgeon. I suppose you mother's that are here with your children today celebrating Mother's Day have never thought of yourselves as open heart surgeons. And you're not. God does the work, but think of it this way. When you shared Christ with your children, you were the scalpel in his hand. You made the incision. The Lord used you to make that incision, to do the surgery, to change hearts, to lead the Gospel of Christ to reside in that heart. And maybe some days it seems like that Gospel has drifted away. Cling to that simple message and keep sharing it because the Lord will do the work.