

May 26, 2019

Sermon Series: "Christ Alive!"

Sermon Title: "Simple Conversations"

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Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning, as we continue our sermon series on proclaiming and living the word and love of Christ, we'll once again be looking at the apostle Paul. Over the last few weeks, we've heard about Paul's dramatic conversion, and how he went from being an enemy of Christ and the church to a proclaimer of Christ. We heard about Paul's willingness to proclaim Christ faithfully, even if it meant suffering. And today, we'll hear another story about the mission work of the Apostle Paul in the story of Lydia, the first Christian convert in Europe.

There's something captivating about the stories of Paul, isn't there? Even I'll admit that parts of the Bible can seem boring or dry, but not Paul's stories. They're full of adventure! High drama. Danger, sea voyages, ship wrecks, dramatic conversion stories. Paul, the brave missionary apostle leading the way, boldly proclaiming Christ without fear to all nations.

And our reading certainly starts that way, doesn't it? After all, the text starts out with a dramatic vision that Paul receives in a dream from a man from Macedonia. "Come to Macedonia and help us!" the man in the vision cries. So immediately, Paul and his companions gather together, jump on a ship, and sail across the sea, stopping several times before they finally reach their destination in Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia. So far, there seems to be plenty of adventure here.

So what happens next? Do Paul and his companions start a complicated evangelism

program, keyed in on winning as many souls for Christ as possible? Does Acts give us a step-by-step process that we can implement in our church? After all, that's how we usually think of "mission", don't we?

Well, I'm afraid that if we're looking for adventure, drama, and tales of glorious missionary efforts, we're not going to find it here. What do Paul and his companions do once they arrive in the city? It's a pretty simple two-step process, isn't it? First, they go outside the city gate to pray. To pray! But once they arrive outside the city, they find a group of women there. A woman named Lydia is among them. And what do they do? They talk to them. That's it. Simple conversation.

Now I want to make something clear. Missionaries are important. And oftentimes, their stories are full of drama, adventure, danger. Have any of you ever sat through a presentation given by a missionary at this church, or maybe another one? I love those types of presentations because the evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit is so obvious. And normally, when we hear the word "mission", that's the kind of mission work we think of. The high drama of the Apostle Paul. Brave missionaries in foreign countries. But today, I'm talking about all of us. You, me, your children, the person sitting next to you. What is our mission in the world today?

Looking at our world today can be pretty overwhelming, can't it? Lots of people who don't know Christ. It's easy to feel like we can never do enough, isn't it? Who needs the Gospel? We all know the answer to that question, don't we? Everyone does. You, me, people of all nations. Everyone, everywhere needs to hear the message of Jesus Christ proclaimed boldly, and lived out faithfully by the church.

But how do you do that? You, personally? I'm sure that a few of you have had the pleasure of going on missionary trips to other

countries, but what about every day? To whom are you sent?

I would venture to say that in each of our lives there's a person like Lydia, someone who needs to hear the word and love of Christ lived and proclaimed by us. And I can't tell you who that person is for you. Is it a neighbor, someone that you know is looking for answers about God? Is it a member of your family, maybe someone who's been burned by the church in the past, but someone that you know needs to hear about the love of Christ once more? Maybe it's someone you work with, or a friend that you haven't spoken to in a while. Whoever it is, proclaiming and living the love of Christ doesn't need to be complicated or overwhelming. Sometimes we're so wrapped up in our own busy lives that just starting a conversation can be the hardest part. But that's all it took for the Apostle Paul, isn't it? Paul and his companions saw the people who were there and acknowledged them in simple conversation.

And what was the result? Lydia received the message and became a baptized believer in Christ. Did it happen because of Paul's eloquence in telling the story of Jesus to those who would hear? Was it because of his likability, his people skills, his status as a missionary and an apostle that Lydia believed? That's not what the text tells us, is it? It tells us that the Lord opened Lydia's heart, not Paul. The Lord opened her heart, and she received Paul's message. She that day became a believer in the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, not out of high drama or adventurous missionary efforts, but out of a simple conversation that the Lord opened her heart through.

I don't know about you, but I take great comfort in that. The Lord opened her heart. It takes some of the pressure off, doesn't it? I know that it can sometimes be awkward to share your faith with others, can't it? Starting up a conversation, or getting outside of our own heads and busy lives for a minute, to hear

the stories of others and tell them about Christ can be a challenge. It can be easy to think that we need all the answers about God, the perfect answer to every question, amazing bravery and missionary zeal. But it doesn't depend entirely on us, does it? The Lord works through simple, ordinary people, just like you and me, to bring the lost into his kingdom. Perhaps the Lord is working through you, here, in this moment. Is there someone that the Lord is sending you to? I would challenge you today to think about who that might be. Who is the "Lydia" in your life? But know this. The pressure is off. You don't need to be the greatest speaker, the bravest missionary, the most daring evangelist. The Lord is the one doing the work. The Lord stirs up our hearts, the Lord sends us to proclaim and live the word and love of Christ, the Lord gives us the words we need to share Christ with others, the Lord provides opportunities for the Gospel to blossom, the Lord opens hearts to receive the good news, and the Lord cares for you as his child as you carry out his mission. The Lord has done the work. We just need to be open to his word, and willing to go where we're sent.

I'd like to end the message today with a story about a friend of mine back in St. Louis. I've asked him if I can share some of his story and he's ok with it. The two of us work together at an ordinary Wal-Mart back in St. Louis. Doesn't sound quite like a mission field, does it? But when I met my friend, he was hostile to Christianity. You see, my friend and his family are practicing pagans. They moved to the United States from Sweden when my friend was in high school. And my friend was used to Christians beating him over the head with the Bible in his home country, or using Christianity as a way to judge him rather than love him. He was even familiar with the Lutheran church, as it's the dominant church in Sweden. After knowing each other for a bit, he said pretty forcefully to me "You know, you're the first Lutheran that I've actually liked." I thought that was pretty funny. But it shows you where he's coming from.

He and I have had conversations, lots of them in the two years that we've known each other. Some at work, a few on Facebook. And once I return to St. Louis in a little while, I'm sure we'll have even more. And in some of those conversations, I've been able to share with him the love of Jesus, and the power of what Christ has done in my life and in the lives of others. Christ makes that possible, not me. Now, has my friend had a big dramatic conversion experience? Not yet. But I'm not sure that's really what it's all about with him. He needs to hear the word and love of Christ proclaimed and lived, again and again. Will he become a believer in the Lord Jesus? I sure hope so. I pray for him. But that isn't up to me. It's the Lord's work. But if the conversation never starts, people like my friend won't hear Christ lived and proclaimed.

Everyone needs the Gospel. And just like Lydia from our story, there's a person in each of your lives who needs to hear and experience the love of Jesus Christ, someone that God has placed in your path, someone that God is sending you to. You too have a part to play in God's mission of proclaiming and living the word and love of Christ. You belong to Christ, and his love for you is beyond measure. And that love is meant to be shared.

Now may the peace of God, and the love of Christ, which is beyond measure and which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and minds as you share his love in simple conversation. Amen.