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Plymouth Congregational UCC
Confirmation Sunday

May 13, 2007

Building an Unexpected Church
Acts 16:9-15

We never have enough time to really dive into even these short little stories about people.

Lydia is one who doesn't take up very much space in our Bible,
but that hasn't kept the commentators and extrapolators from
dissecting each word,
putting her into her historical, geographical, social and oh-so-varied theological place.

Most people recognize her as the "seller of purple cloth" because that's the very basic picture our text provides:
no fanatical background like we had with Paul,
no juicy tales of adultery or miracle healings or angel visitations.
Just a curious heart, a baptism, then an invitation to community:
"come and stay at my home", she prevailed upon them.

But even though it's short, the whole scenario is quite unexpected!

One of the things that most of us don't immediately pick up as modern readers of this story –
and to be truthful, I had to look it up –
is that Philippi, this "leading city of the district of Macedonia" is Paul's first preaching foray into *Europe*.

I imagine that Lydia, her efforts focused on being the successful businesswoman that she was,
would never have expected her name to be passed down through centuries,
making it into commentaries and who's who women in the Bible
as the *first European convert* to the Christian way.

One commentary I came across this week noted the irony that it is "European Christianity [which] has long prevented women from being leaders in the church, when the first European Christian was a woman"¹.

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I go back to this idea of an unexpected church.

For Paul – that great founder of so many churches –  
everything about his journey in this story seems unexpected, perhaps even surreal.

Here are just the footnotes:

In the passages just before this morning's reading began, the writer of Acts is sharing some of Paul's travels.  
Paul is acting the circuit rider, visiting the new church starts in the cities he'd preached in before,  
strengthening the small but growing communities with his encouragement.

But then there's this short passage that tells how Paul tried to continue through Asia, but he was stopped.  
He had a vision to "come over to Macedonia and help us", reads Acts.

So Paul *expected* to travel through Asia, but he ended up in Europe.

Then, in the Roman Colony of Philippi for a few days, he wanted to celebrate the Sabbath.  
But it seems there may not have even been the necessary Quorum of male Jews in this city to support a synagogue.  
So while Paul might have *expected* to preach in the city's *central* synagogue,  
he ended up praying *outside the gates* at the river.

And by that river, where the strict laws separating men and women at worship together were apparently relaxed, the group of itinerant preachers sat among the women.

Perhaps Paul *expected* to greet the one or two local Jewish men,  
but he ended up talking with a *foreign Gentile woman*.

The moral I take today from my reading of this story:

You never know what you're going to get when you set out to share the Good News.

Try as we might to plan and prepare we can never fully predict what the fruits of our labor may be.

We want something, so we plant the seeds –

and in the growing we find all has changed from the original vision of our harvest.

(Your committee may start a project that takes an entirely different turn than you'd imagined;  
or a conversation started over coffee becomes a healing friendship;

I've had sermons that began with a clear theme and direction, but by the time I got to the pulpit have ended up in a place I least expected.)

You never know what you're going to get when you set out to share the Good News.

This holds true for me as I look back on this year with our Confirmation Class.

Paige Noon and I set out with expectations – not many, but enough.

We expected to teach a little about Jesus the man, Jesus the myth and Jesus the Christ;

we expected to learn from the class new ways of encountering wonder, the Divine,  
and of making meaning amidst the challenges of life;

we expected to engage what it is to be a Christian, and a member of THIS church;

and we expected to have fun and get frustrated – often in the very same hour...

And while these expectations were met to varying degrees, *they were also completely broken open!*

We moved through biblical stories that I've never heard read in church;

we wondered in ways I'd never considered about the justice stands that the UCC espouses.

And that's just a taste of the conversations we ended up in.

All we could do was plan:

plan to share the Good News of what being a Christian as a part of this community means to us.

The rest of it, the *building* of that Good News in each person's life is completely individual

...and most often completely unexpected.

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The reading this morning says that Lydia was already a worshiper of God, a seeker, and that her heart was open to eagerly listen.

I won't pretend that every person who comes to worship as a part of this faith community always listens

EAGERLY – that's okay,

because every message offered doesn't always speak to our lives in the particular moment that it's given.

But we ARE seekers, and our hearts are opened in our seeking.

And isn't that good, that being opened –

because what we find here may be nothing like we expected!

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This morning eight of our co-seekers in this community will make a choice

which all of you over 14 years old have also made:

*do I choose to become a member of this congregation –*  
 with all the rights and responsibilities that membership entails,  
 with all the “cost and joy of discipleship” as our UCC Statement of Faith names it –  
*or do I choose to continue journeying alongside this congregation as a friend,*  
 not quite able to be a member,  
 but still a valued part of this community?

This choice that each of us makes helps us in always building an unexpected church.

To me, it’s a never-ending surprise when someone new wants to become a deep part of *this* community.  
 Not because I don’t think we have a good thing here!  
*But how humbling.*  
 How startling that you or I may be the Good News to the person sitting next to us!  
 ...that we have something to offer.

And then there’s the turn-around:

every time we welcome a new member or a new friend into our worship and into our fellowship;  
 into our visiting when sick or in need;  
 into our debating and seeking and praying and learning –  
*Every time we welcome someone new, we are welcoming the unexpected ...*  
*because we WILL be changed by them.*

Paul hadn’t expected to go to Europe or to pray by the river or to use a Gentile woman’s home as his Philippian home-base.

Yet he was changed by all of it.

Lydia didn’t expect to lead the way to baptism by the river or to become the financial supporter of Christianity’s spread into the West.

Yet she was changed it.

And Paige and I didn’t really expect all that we encountered in our year with these 8 young people or the power of the covenants they will make today. Who knew!

And we are changed by them.

So will you be, as they continue to grow as a part of this community.

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You never know what you’re going to get when you set out to share the Good News.

But as a member or friend of the Church each of us does it anyway!

And that, my friends, *is* Good News.

Share it.

Amen.

ⁱ “SAMUEL/Sermon Seeds” for May 13, 2007 on www.ucc.org