**SERMON Acts 16:9-15**

**Introduction Story**

I can distinctly remember the moment, as an adult, when I walked into a place and felt entirely at home. In a place and amongst people where I felt like I could risk the vulnerability of being fully known. I was attending, what they call an exploratory weekend, at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. It’s a two-day, overnight experience where you sit in on a few classes, hear some presentations, get tours, and attend worship in Caldwell Chapel, there on campus.

Now, I don’t know about you but feelings of ‘home’ and of ‘welcome’ strike a particularly deep cord when you’ve also experienced the sting of rejection. Of discomfort or tension and stress in a place. I’m sure that I’m not the only one to have had the horrible feeling of dread when walking into somewhere – it may be a family members home, your own workplace or maybe even a church. Heart-racing, clammy hands, heat rising on the back of your neck, stomach churning and the feeling that all eyes are on you, judging. It’s a terrible feeling and one we tend to avoid repeating if we can! So, when you walk into a place, sit down and instead of feeling completely out of place…you feel, as I did, sitting in Caldwell Chapel for the first time, a wash of emotion that I can only describe has relief…it’s nothing short of euphoric.

The fact is that human beings, even if you’re an introvert, are built for true, honest connection. From the moment you were born until you take your last breath, deep, authentic connection is the thing your soul most craves. Not just as an occasional experience, but as a reality woven into every day of your life. Accessing this sense of connection, sense of home, doesn’t happen by accident. Feeling welcomed, and a deep sense of connection with those around me at LPTS was because faculty and students had worked hard (well beyond my visit) to nurture a culture of openness and acceptance. The worship service itself bore the marks of that hard and intentional work. It was crafted in such a way as to communicate the hopes and dreams of a community who was learning to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, anti-racist and celebratory of women’s contributions to ministry.

So, when in the service the song “For Everyone Born” was sung, and the overwhelming realization that this was in fact a place and a community where the lyrics of this song were actually true, the result of LPTS’s hospitality was nothing short of liberating. Yes, seminary wasn’t perfectly queer-friendly, it wasn’t practicing anti-racism perfectly and all the vestiges of patriarchy were not completely eradicated, but it was a community that sought to practice radical hospitality, a community on the move towards greater openness. A trajectory that the Christian Movement has been on for a very long time.

**Introduction to the Scripture**

Like much of Acts, this week’s text finds Christians on the road (with lots of difficult place names, thank you David). Easter People have always been people on the move and Paul in our passage today, seemingly unable to stand still, is called by the God’s Spirit (that compelling internal voice of the Divine) to proclaim the good news of hope and wholeness in a part of the ancient world full of a great diversity of people.

So far, we have seen how the message of Jesus has drawn more and more people in. And time and time again, we see these early disciples – be it Jesus himself, Paul, Tabitha, or Peter – crossing geographic and cultural boundaries, extending the liberation news of resurrection and invitation into God’s kingdom. Tuned in to the internal voice of God’s Spirit, they find themselves traversing these new and complex social, religious, and political spaces, challenging the customs and norms of the day. Establishing whole communities of people committed to living, eating, working, and worshiping alongside those whom they would have previously avoided.

**Introduction to Lydia**

Our focus this morning is on the person of Lydia who persuades Paul and his companions to stay at “(her) house” (v.15). Lydia’s identity ordinarily would have left her on the outside of many communities, unwelcomed or as least de-valued. But it is hugely significant that she is named at all. She is not just the ‘woman by the riverside,’ or ‘the woman who deals in purple cloth.’ She is Lydia. She is a God-worshipper. She is a native of Thyatira. She is a dealer in purple cloth.

The first designation identifies her as one of a number of individuals in Acts with a faithful proclivity towards the God of Israel (cf. Acts 13:43; 17:17; 18:7 among others). She has inclined herself to this God even though she is not identified as Jewish. She was more likely a Gentile who worshipped God along *with* Jews but had not converted to Judaism.

Secondly, the naming of her hometown is an unexpected twist; for even though it was a Macedonian man at that beginning of today’s passage, that requested the help of Paul; it is Lydia, a foreign woman from outside of Macedonia, whose spiritual openness is first noted.

And third, her profession as a dealer in purple cloth is of special note. Thyatira, her hometown was a place known for its dying of wool and wool clothing. So, she brings this skill with her to Philippi. We also know that in the ancient world owning and wearing purple was a sign of wealth, because the process of dyeing cloth purple was expensive and time-consuming. However, there is a difference between ‘purple wearers’ and ‘purple workers.’ Dyeing fabric was dirty and smelly and usually done on the outskirts of town, so Lydia may or may not have been wealthy, *but* she had enough money to own a house and keep servants and run a business.

And importantly for us this morning, we know that as God opened her heart, Lydia immediately opened her home. She invited folks into *her house*. A place where many of the cultural and social norms of the day were ignored in favor of extravagant welcome and radical hospitality. You see not only were Jews invited into the home of a Gentile, but men were also invited into the house of a women. A little detail that is easily overlooked today!

Lydia’s house is a ‘contrast society’ on a small scale. She has nurtured a place where women can lead. A place where even strangers were welcomed. A place of belonging for people of differing countries and customs. She has created a place of welcome and place of worship at a time when such gatherings were often met with suspicion and sometimes outright hostility. She has shared her resources at a time when women were almost entirely dependent on their male relatives for financial security and physical safety. Lydia’s small-scale ‘contrast society,’ is that same beloved community we see described again and again throughout the church’s humble beginnings, and it is marked by radical hospitality. A value that Easter People have much *still* to learn about and practice today. And I’d like to offer 3 ideas about how to do so:

**Contrast Society**

*First, Easter People must remain open to the Spirit’s moving.* This is such a difficult and deep topic of consideration, especially for those of us that have grown up with a scientific, evidence-based worldview. God’s Spirit is invisible, it’s untouchable, it’s pure mystery in every sense of the word, and yet when it moves, it’s effects can be seen and felt. So, whether you understand God’s Spirit to be an internal voice of compassion and reason, or the sense of ‘home’ when you walk into a room, that palpable feeling of love and acceptance amongst people who truly know you…the atomic vibrations in the atmosphere in and between every living thing, God’s Spirit is moving. And Easter People are people who, like Lydia, cultivate an openness to that movement…inspired to open her home, share her resources, and provide leadership and support to a burgeoning beloved community of worshippers.

*Two, Easter People draw the circle ever wider.* Throughout our study in Acts we have witnessed this ever-expanding invitation and its impact on the lives of an increasingly diverse array of people. And Easter People in the church can draw the circle wider when we provide the kind of hospitality that embraces everyone, and does not tolerate hatred, bigotry, or dehumanizing ideologies, instead prioritizes love, healing, and wholeness. This Spirit of inclusion must be explicitly expressed from the pulpit and in the language of our mission statements, bulletins, and websites. It needs to be printed and spoken and taught and repeated and modeled by all people, imprinted on our individual hearts. Easter People are willing to share space with others, willing to be moved by the Spirit of God to see the Divine in another human being. For once we view a person in the illuminating light of actual relationship, we can’t help but see God in them. Hospitality ascribes real value to real people. Declaring them worthy of welcome.

*Finally, Easter People work hard to safe spaces through their hospitality.* This is a unique quality, and one we see in the kind of invitation extending by Lydia to Paul and his companions. Lydia’s home was not just a psychologically or aesthetically safe space. In a time when people could die for being Christian, a safe worship space was essential. This kind of awareness goes beyond space where people are greeted with ambivalence or merely tolerated. Hospitality that creates a truly safe places, is where people are received with great joy, where their whole selves are celebrated and not held in suspicion. This is the kind of expression of welcome that is disarming, that eases fears born out of past rejection, and lets people know that this place is different.

**Conclusion**

Dear friends, dear Easter People, is this place different? How are you contributing to the atmosphere of acceptance here? How are do you extend and practice radical hospitality? In what ways do you share your resources here and with one another, be they time, talent, or tithe? How might Lydia’s open heart and open home inspire you to never stop learning the sacred art of welcome?

There will always be people and churches that fight to keep things small, *as they are*, familiar and comfortable. If we’re honest, most of us have unconsciously acted in ways that do this. It’s a self-protective impulse…because radical hospitality creates turbulence in ourselves and in our established groups.

But Easter People seek to *remain open to the Spirit’s moving*, to *draw the circle ever wider*, and work to *create safe spaces through their hospitality*. This is the on-going task that Lydia’s example charges us with. May we rest in the knowledge that God’s Spirit of love empowers and compels us on this journey.