



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

20-May-2007 Easter 7

SCRIPTURE: Acts 16:9-15 John 14:23-29

SERMON: European Vocation (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

Today's Focus Scripture in Acts 16 describes the events in Philippi that led up to Paul and Silas being slung into prison. The basis for that great Elvis song; *Jailhouse Rock!*

In the verses immediately preceding today's reading we can hear of two occasions when the Holy Spirit changed Paul's itinerary. The original idea had been to return east, but Paul comes to the sense that God wanted him to earn more frequent flier miles. Instead of turning for home, it was "Go West young man". Paul's willingness to accept God's guidance provides a major turning point in the story of the Church. Instead of returning to Antioch or Jerusalem, back into Asia Minor, Paul crosses the boundary from Asia into Europe carrying into that continent, for the first time the Good News of Jesus.

I want to say very early on in this sermon that God is asking us as a church to change our itinerary, to go in new and different directions, to be willing to face new challenges, to cross boundaries so we can better share our experience of God, the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who embraces the world with endless love.

Paul crosses this invisible yet real boundary and in fulfilling his *European Vocation*. And when he got there he continued to cross other boundaries.

Paul and his entourage go outside the city gate of Philippi on the Sabbath. They leave the relative calm and order of the city, entering the unincorporated land, beyond the immediate control of the city authorities. They do this to meet with a group of women who gather for prayer by the river. There Paul will sit and talk with the women, an act that was a grave breach of Jewish tradition, where men did not speak with women, especially those who were strangers.

The result of crossing these boundaries was the birth of a new church congregation among those who accepted the message Paul was proclaiming. Among these newborns was Lydia. Most likely born a Gentile, she is from Thyatira, a well-known textile city. She makes her living as a dealer in purple cloth, a luxury item for the wealthy and the royalty in the Roman world. She has an entrée into a privileged circle as she carries out her business. She has independent means, unhindered by a husband!

It was God's Spirit that directed Paul to follow a new geographical direction, God's Spirit that nudged him into an open engagement with the culture of that city, the real culture, not the culture Paul might have wished for. It was God's Spirit that gave life to Paul's witness and proclamation, and it was God's Spirit that opened Lydia's heart so she might discover for herself the grace and favor of God. Lydia and her household are welcomed into the Christian community through baptism. Thus the faith and the message of Jesus, crosses into a new continent and a new church is gathered or formed in a new city in this response of faith of Lydia.

In her turn Lydia demonstrates that she is willing to cross boundaries in her own life by means of her faithful responses. She offers hospitality to Paul and his companions, urging them to be guests at her home where she also hosts the new Philippian church. Lydia practices inclusion and hospitality; key practices, attitudes, and priorities for the health of the church of Jesus Christ both in the First Century *and today!*

By the river, Paul had welcomed Lydia into the church through Baptism. Lydia then welcomed the church into her home, a clear example that all ministry, in the name of Jesus Christ, is mutual ministry: always in response to God's grace, and always involving fellowship and friendship and mutual support with and for and from all who share this faith for themselves. Any genuine experience of God's Spirit demands that we share and make community with others, even with people who are different from us, *especially* with people who are different from us!

Look around this morning. See all the folks who are your faithful partners as we worship and pray, as we learn and discuss, as we work and serve together. Each week at the end of our Order of Worship Service we stand together, we join hands and we are sent out, sent back into the world to cross boundaries for God. We are commissioned to go and live out our Christian vocation in the world. When we stand together in this way, when we are joined together, we are maybe at our best and finest as a church. Linked together with our friends and neighbors it is easy to sense that we lots of faith and commitment; that we have a strength that comes from beyond us, allowing us to make a real difference in the life of the world in which we live and move. Today, I want you to celebrate all that you are and do as you express your faith through the work of our congregation. Paraphrasing what is written about the new church of Philippi, in the letter to the Philippians: *"You Northminsterians know that in the early days of our sharing in the gospel, when I left Scotland, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone."* You were and you are the generous ones, the hospitable ones, the faithful ones, who crossed the boundary into a living faith with work to do - *work to do for God.*

To continue this work for God we truly need one another, and others who will be drawn amongst us. The question I have wrestled with for some weeks now is this one, *"How do I say what I want to say, what I believe needs to be said, hoping that God will use my words and emotions, my passion to lead us forward, onward, upward, outward?"*

I want to talk about the word and the effect and the emotion that is wrapped up in the word "enthusiasm"; a word that originates from the Greek phrase "en theos" – *IN GOD!* What we need is en-theos-i-am - *"in-God-i-am!"* Enthusiasm is not wishful thinking, nor happy-clappy emotion. Enthusiasm is not created but received as a gift from the Loving, Living God who meets us in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Held in the tender, passionate love of Jesus our response cannot but be deep-seated, deliberate, careful, prayerful.

I begin with myself, acknowledging that some say preachers should never talk about themselves, while still others would say that anyone can and should only speak out of their own experience. I know that when I thrive it is the result of being "in God", *being enthusiastic!* Your enthusiasm for God, your enthusiasm for the living of our faith in the real world we inhabit, your enthusiasm for all the things that all of us do and are and give and become as we serve God in our little corner of the world community – *that is what fires me up and keeps me going!*

And as this is true for me, it is also true that you! You thrive, *all of you thrive*, on the enthusiasm of others around you; when you do your share, when you get involved, when you serve and go the extra mile. You are excited and uplifted and encouraged by the enthusiasm that all the rest of us share with you – that enthusiasm – the enthusiasm of the whole body makes what each of you do possible!

The message before us today, and for the coming months is this: *Northminsterians be enthusiastic!* People of Northminster Presbyterian Church be in God: as you shape and live your lives, be in God for the life of the world around us and for the work of our congregation. Be in God, because God raised Jesus from the grave, and God promises to be in you, and in everything you are and do. So be in God in all that we do as a church. Those of you who join this congregation today or who consider doing so in the future, come in through being in God – *by being enthusiastic!*

We have a real need to be enthusiastic - to be in God. Because if we are not enthusiastic, if we are not in God, then we are out of God and we are *in trouble*.

We have a real need to be enthusiastic - for all that we do together, for all that God is doing to challenge us and change us. If we are not in God then we are *lost and losing*.

We have a real need to be enthusiastic - for all the many ways we currently serve God and others. If we are not in God then we are *going in circles*.

We have a real need to be enthusiastic - for the new and developing ways by which we are discovering and learning we can serve God and our neighbors. If we are not in God then we will *get stuck*.

Real enthusiasm - seeking to be "in God", *is costly*. It means we need to move away from other things that are not centered "in God" so that we have space, time, freedom, energy, imagination, and love for what God asks of us and needs from us.

Real enthusiasm - seeking to be "in God", *will not protect us* from the trials and tribulations of living, but it will give us the best perspective.

Real enthusiasm - seeking to be "in God", *is not an emotion*, not just for the bubbly, outgoing, loud people. Being in God is God's gift for all of us. We may be enthusiastic introverts - *we are all called to be "in God"*.

Let's see if any of us have crossed the equator on board a ship and had to take part in the traditional ceremony with Neptune and water and whatever else – maybe including some rum... hands up! Today, we will celebrate our very own and important water ceremony. As Caitlin Portelli is baptized, she will cross a boundary into the Church. She will be embraced as part of the Christian family in the world. Through the waters of baptism, Caitlin will join you and me and many, many people, here in this church and in the worldwide church as she crosses over into a life of Christian growth, nurture and faith.

All of us who are baptized have crossed that very same boundary. As members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, as members of the Church of Jesus Christ, in God we are charged to be enthusiastic disciples and followers. We are ordained to be believers and servants. In Baptism we are set apart to live "in God" - in the God who always leads, always supports, allows strengthens, always guides. "In God" *we can and will cross* boundaries that otherwise might intimidate us. "In God" we have a life's work to do as we live out God's call on our lives.

All that we currently are and will grow to be as Christian men and women and as a faithful, fruitful church begins in, and comes from Jesus Christ. *Jesus Christ with us, in us, for us*. My friends, out of your commitment to follow Jesus Christ you are in God, you are *"en theos."* As you practice, live, express and share this godly enthusiasm, your life of faith will soar. And in God all of us can get about the costly, serious, life-meaning and life-changing matter of living the enthusiastic life!

How to end this sermon....?? Let's do what we do at the end of the Service each week. Let's stand and join hands! Come on, let's gather as we do for the Benediction each week. The ushers will get freaked out because they will think they forgot to receive the offering!! *[Here the Congregation stands and joins hands]*

"Northminster Presbyterian Church: you are in God. *Be "in God"*. Share your being "in God" in everything that you are and in all you do! God needs you! God needs all of you! The world needs you! Your friends and neighbors need you! *Be "in God" and let this enthusiasm take hold of your life and inspire your living, today and always! Amen.*

Acts 16:9-15

9During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. 11We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. 13On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. 14A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 15When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

John 14:23-29

23Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. 24Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. 25"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. 28You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

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