



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

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The Spirit Is Moving Among Us

Sermon preached at the 11 a.m. service, May 5, 2013

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

Based on Acts 16:9-15 and John 14:23-29

How many of you were born in New York City, in one of its five boroughs where today's Bike-a-Thon is now riding? How many of you never expected to live here in this metro area? Here we all are.

Think about the places you've lived. Think about the places you've traveled. Have you ever ended up somewhere you never expected to be? And maybe that turned out to be the best thing that could have happened?

Paul never expected to be in Troas (a town on the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey). Paul was headed this way up into Asia, but ended up 1,000 miles that way—in Europe, in Macedonia, what we know as Greece—on another continent entirely. I doubt Paul expected to land in a little town like Philippi. While his luggage went to Egypt ... just kidding.

When we let the Holy Spirit guide us, like Paul did, like Lydia did, surprising things can happen.

When you travel, as some of you here today are doing, do you look for a church to attend? Usually—not always, but usually—I do. I'm something of a professional church visitor, always curious to see how other folks, Episcopalians and others, "do" church. Even more important to me: Connecting with a worshipping community makes me feel less a stranger in a strange land.

A few weeks ago, only days after the Boston Marathon bombing, I was traveling—not as a stranger in a strange land, but to my own hometown (which I recognize would be a strange land to some). Given the horrific events unfolding that week, I felt a strong need to be in church that Sunday morning. I needed to be with a community who was going to grieve and question and pray and seek God's comfort and strength together. When I did that, I felt connected with my own community of St. Bart's and with all the other communities across this country, across the world, that I knew were doing the same thing.

Maybe Paul and his group felt some of that. For sure they felt they had good news to share. On the Sabbath they went looking for "a place of prayer." They'd been in town long enough to know where to look: outside the gate, down by the river. They "sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there."

Lydia, the leader of that group of women, was a long way from her own hometown of Thyatira—an area known for textiles, especially for purple cloth. Purple dye was rare and costly, which made purple cloth a definite luxury item. Lydia had a home large enough to invite Paul and his followers to. Lydia may have been wealthy. Or maybe she was a working woman, having to support herself with the work of her own hands. Maybe her household comprised those who worked alongside her in her business. What we know was that Lydia was a worshiper of God, and that these women had gathered on the Sabbath at a place of prayer.

I think each group probably surprised the other. Lydia and the women may not have expected to be joined by a strange group of men from another continent. Paul and his group likely didn't expect to find a group of women at the place of prayer. But there they all are.

Paul doesn't question whether this is a legitimate worshipping community. He doesn't ask to talk to the men. Lydia and the women don't turn the visitors away. They don't quiz each other on whether they believe every word of the creed. They don't ask what position each other holds on the social and political questions of the day.

When these people who want to pray and worship God meet each other, something amazing happens. They listen, really listen, to each other. Hearts are opened. Hospitality is offered and accepted. The Spirit moves among them.

Unexpected encounters and personal connections have the potential to transform us.

St. Bart's receives visitors every day of the year—visitors from literally every continent in the world. Some people intend to visit here; they've planned to come to Manhattan and planned to visit St. Bart's. Some find themselves here unexpectedly. Some come to pray. Some come seeking a place of refuge, where it's safe to

question, where they can grow spiritually. Some come for the music. Some come looking for ways to serve. Some come seeking a place to baptize their children and raise their family. Some aren't sure exactly what they're seeking, but find themselves drawn to this holy place.

Did you notice the sign at our front door when you came in? "Let every guest be welcomed as Christ." Words from St. Benedict. That sign lets every person know: You are welcome here. Doesn't matter where you come from, what you do for a living, what you wear, what your age or stage of life or politics or orientation is—you are welcome here. That sign reminds us St. Bartians that it is God's own welcome we need to offer every person who comes through our doors.

Maybe someone greeted you warmly when you came in this morning. Maybe you filled out a welcome card or sent an e-mail or left a phone message, and you got a response. Maybe you've taken classes here. Maybe you attend services as you can. Maybe you read our website, or came for a concert, or volunteer in our soup kitchen.

Maybe you wandered in one day to take photos, and someone answered your questions or gave you directions with warmth and friendliness. Maybe you came into the church to pray on your lunch hour, and one of our Facilities staff ran after you as you were leaving to return the scarf or sunglasses you left behind. Maybe something about this place of prayer just speaks to your spirit.

I can tell you that something amazing happens here on a pretty regular basis. People—people from a variety of locations and backgrounds—listen, really listen, to each other. Hearts are opened. Hospitality is offered and accepted. The Spirit moves among us.

Today is Welcome Sunday. In just a few minutes, we'll welcome a group of new members into the St. Bart's community. They, like all of us, come from a variety of places and many different faith backgrounds. Each in her/his own way has been drawn here and has decided to join this particular worshipping community of St. Bart's.

A few years ago, one woman told me she'd been coming to St. Bart's off and on for a while and thought maybe it was time to join officially. I said, "That's great! Tell me a little more about that." She looked sheepish and said, "Well, my mother's been after me to join." "Oh . . . how long have you been coming here?" "About 30 years."

After another Welcome Sunday service several years ago, I met for the first time a young man who'd just joined the St. Bart's community. I asked him one of my favorite questions: "What made you want to join St. Barts?" He said, "I'd been thinking about going back to church, so I looked up some churches on the web and made a list of several I wanted to visit in person. St. Bart's was the first one on my list. So I came in, liked what I saw and heard and experienced in the service. By the time Buddy said, 'Even if this is your first time here, if you already know St. Bart's is the place for you, come on down!' I'd already decided St. Bart's was the right church for me, so I came on down and joined on the spot."

Thirty (or more) years, first time, everything in between: You are welcome here in this place.

You are welcome at this table, which—as you'll hear—we understand to be God's table, not our own. God's table that it is our privilege to share. A table that has the potential to transform us, maybe even transform the world.

When we let the Holy Spirit guide us, surprising things can happen.

Lydia and her household become a Christian community, the first church in Europe. They are the Philippians that Paul stays with and returns to and writes to so fondly. They keep praying and worshipping and welcoming in that place of prayer, outside the gate, down by the river.

We will keep praying and worshipping and welcoming in this place of prayer between two rivers.

Here we all are.

And the Spirit is moving among us.

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*For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
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