

May 22, 2022

Texts: Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15

Title: “To Be Used of God”

I want to ask you a question this morning: how do you respond when God—or life itself—changes your plans? This is relevant to consider because if it hasn’t happened to you, it certainly will. There’s an old “Peanuts” cartoon strip where Charlie Brown says, “I learned something in school today, I signed up for folk guitar, computer program-ming, stained glass art, shoemaking and a natural foods work-shop.” In the second panel he says, “[Instead] I got spelling, his-tory, math, and two study periods.” In the third panel Charlie’s friend asks, “So, what did you learn?” Charlie says, “I learned that what you sign up for and what you get are two different things.”

I don’t know about classes but I do know that life seems that way quite often. How do you respond to unexpected disappointments? To a sudden change in your plans? How you respond will, in large part, depend on your willingness to trust in God and to let God use you for His work.

But what about when God changes your plans in such a way that changes the direction of the rest of your life? If so, you can appreciate this story from Acts 16. Paul and Silas and Timothy discovered that sometimes God can often guide as much by the *closing* of doors as He does by the *opening* of doors.” **And how we respond to the closed or opened doors, says a lot about our belief in God, and about how God is able to use us to accomplish His good purposes.**

Anne Graham Lotz, the daughter of Billy Graham, once wrote that when she

faces a difficult situation or a closed door, she doesn't ask God, "Why?" It doesn't do any good to ask why, she says. Instead, she asks, "What are you trying to teach me through this, Lord?"

God's ways are higher than our ways, and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. If you're waiting around for God to answer that question, "Why?" you can end up bitter and find yourself withdrawing from God. But if you change the question to "What are you trying to teach me through it," you remain open to God's working in you because God is still working in every circumstance, no matter how strange or painful they are.

And that brings me to the central question of this scripture lesson today: Do you expect God to do something important with your life? Yes, even today, at this time in your life.

Paul and his companions trusted that God would act through them wherever they were. So when Paul dreamed of a man from Macedonia begging for help, he and his companions headed straight in that direction. They ended up in the city of Philippi. And they set out to find a group of Jewish men to share Jesus' message with. And once again, God changed their plans. Instead, they came across a small group of women gathered by a river, praying. Was this *really* God's big mission opportunity for them? After all women ranked pretty low in the society of the day. But God, of course, works through all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances.

I read the story of Pastor Chuck Smith, who led a small church in Costa Mesa,

California, back in the 1960s. It was located very near a local beach. Pastor Smith noticed that a number of young people began attending the church, some of whom hadn't been in a church before. One thing stood out. They most certainly didn't know anything about dressing in your "Sunday best." In fact, many of them came directly from the beach to the church on Sunday morning; some even walked in without shirts or shoes. This wouldn't have been a problem, except that the beach had oil deposits in the sand, and oil clung to their bare feet. A few long-time members of the church got upset when these young people tracked oil on the church's beautiful carpet.

One Sunday, Pastor Smith got to church and found a sign on the door that said, "Shirts and shoes please." He saw that sign and he thought, "they're going to feel like they aren't wanted here and they very likely won't be back after that kind of a greeting."

Think about that for a moment. What barriers do we place between God and the people around us? What limits do we place on God's work? Paul and his companions were committed to preaching the good news of Jesus Christ—to Jewish men. Did God really divert them from their grand missionary journey so that they could preach to a group of women? At least one of them, a woman named Lydia, wasn't even Jewish. Was this unexpected—and maybe uncomfortable—situation really an opportunity from God? Evidently, Paul and Silas and Timothy thought so. They sat down and began to speak to the women. And the Lord opened the heart of Lydia; she and her entire household were

baptized that day. But that's not the end of the story.

Back to Pastor Smith and his church's oily carpets for a moment. Smith called a meeting of the church leaders that day. And those leaders caught a vision of what God could do in and through them if they eliminated their barriers and welcomed these young people without reservation to their church. They decided that if they had to tear out the pews and rip up the carpets to make those young people feel welcome, they would do it.

And that's what happened. They made their sanctuary "beach friendly." And it seems that God brought revival of sorts for that little church. They attracted more and more young people, and their congregation grew in vitality. The culture of that church changed but because they welcomed it, God was able to do this work and the newcomers received the word of God.

And that brings me to the final question for this morning, will we obey God's calling whether we understand it or not? Remember that we are God's partners in the healing and salvation of the world, in spreading the good news of Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite passages of Scripture is 2 Corinthians 5:20, **"We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."**

You see, God can't do much without the full commitment of his people and his people must see every moment of their lives as an opportunity to do the work of Jesus. There's a quote that I've seen every so often, maybe you have too, "Those

who put everything in God's hands eventually see God's hand in everything.”

That's what Paul and his companions did. So, let's finish our scripture lesson for today. Lydia and her entire household were baptized that day, and they invited the men to stay at her house. Lydia started a small Christian church in her home, the first Christian church in the Western world. And it was from this small outpost in Philippi that the message of Jesus spread throughout Europe, and eventually to the U.S., and, eventually, to us today. It's amazing what God can do with just a few committed people who are open to the work of God.

Do you believe that God has something further in mind for you, even now? God places His greatest opportunities right in front of us, in the ordinary circumstances of our daily lives. We don't always see them. Do you expect God to act through you? Amen.