

Acts 16:9–15 (NET)

<sup>16:9</sup> A vision appeared to Paul during the night: A Macedonian man was standing there urging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” <sup>16:10</sup> After Paul saw the vision, we attempted immediately to go over to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

### *Arrival at Philippi*

<sup>16:11</sup> We put out to sea from Troas and sailed a straight course to Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis, <sup>16:12</sup> and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of that district of Macedonia, a Roman colony. We stayed in this city for some days. <sup>16:13</sup> On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate to the side of the river, where we thought there would be a place of prayer, and we sat down and began to speak to the women who had assembled there. <sup>16:14</sup> A woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, a God-fearing woman, listened to us. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying. <sup>16:15</sup> After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, “If you consider me to be a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house.” And she persuaded us.

John 14:23–29 (NET)

<sup>14:23</sup> Jesus replied, “If anyone loves me, he will obey my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and take up residence with him. <sup>14:24</sup> The person who does not love me does not obey my words. And the word you hear is not mine, but the Father’s who sent me.

<sup>14:25</sup> “I have spoken these things while staying with you. <sup>14:26</sup> But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will cause you to remember everything I said to you.

<sup>14:27</sup> “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give it to you as the world does. Do not let your hearts be distressed or lacking in courage. <sup>14:28</sup> You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away and I am coming back to you.’ If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I am. <sup>14:29</sup> I have told you now before it happens, so that when it happens you may believe.

## Love in Action

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: May 9, 2010                      Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture:     *Acts 16:9-15*  
                  *John 14:23-29*

In the middle of a modest clearing cut out of the hardwoods in the rolling woodlands of rural Louisiana sits Hurricane Grove Baptist Church. To the left of the church lies a cemetery, to the right enough space for the mammoth deep fryers and ling tables for the fried chicken dinners during revivals. In front of the church a small patch of oaks divides the entrance, and the hard red-clay forms a drive and parking area. Still vivid in my memory is this scene, but even more so are the warm summer Sundays, after church, when the church emptied out onto the red hardpan and the congregation chatted its good-byes to one another.

I don't know if it's the same now, but in those days fixed in my recollection there was a certain unhurriedness in these after-church conversations. Sunday was a day of worship and then rest—no work, no shopping, no fishing. This last one was the only one I thought of as an unnecessary restriction. But this keeping of the Sabbath allowed a slow friendliness to exist. When it came time to depart, the friendliness turned to invitation. Every person there invited the people they were talking to come home with them for dinner. It would be easy to think of this as a polite greeting, like we might say, "How are doing?" and expect a perfunctory, "Doing well." You could expect it to go this way. Someone would say, "Come on home to dinner with us." And the answer would be, "Well, thank you, but I better not today." And most often it did go that way. But often enough to make you realize that the invitation was always real, the answer might be, "We'd love to. We'll bring some chicken and some biscuits." And the afternoon would become a leisurely meal and neighborly conversation. It was a delightful custom, and I often think how nurturing the easy friendliness and the unhurried pace were.

Well, anyway, I got thinking about Hurricane Grove Baptist Church and the slow pace of those southern Sundays when I was reading today's passage from the book of Acts. For one, travel in the ancient world was painstaking. (Slide1) Troas to Philippi was about 135 miles. Paul and his company actually made good time on this trip—two days and part of a third. Another time the same trip in the reverse direction took Paul five days. In any case, this time they spent several days in Philippi waiting for the Sabbath. There seems to have been no synagogue in Philippi at the time, but Paul found a spot out by the river where there was a place of prayer, where the women gathered. It was about a mile and a half from the city, which they would have walked. Finally, Paul got to speak his message. There was nothing fast about Paul's travels as a preacher. It took time and an easy patience. It reminded me of Hurricane Grove.

We don't know a great deal about this place of prayer or the women who gathered at it. But we do know a few things. First of all the women in Greece and Rome in this time had significant freedom and standing. John Polhill, and evangelical Biblical commentator, says that they had legal rights that even extended to initiating divorce. Second, we know that the women who were gathered for prayer by the river were gentile sympathizers with Judaism. God fearers, as they were called, were people who had become believers in the God of Israel, but who had not fully converted to Judaism. This explains why there was no synagogue as yet. We also know

that one woman, Lydia, was a woman of some means. She had her own business and a household large enough to invite others to stay.

And so it comes to the next way that I was reminded of Hurricane Grove by this passage. Paul preaches his message, and he moves Lydia's heart. Paul baptizes her and her household. And when church is over, Lydia says, "Come home and stay with us."

This is not a small matter. Lydia responds to the presence of the Spirit in her heart with an act of generosity. We don't hear about a personal Lord and Savior. We don't hear about her sense of personal spiritual growth. We don't hear Lydia talking about what she gets from Jesus Christ, though we can be sure that the warming in her heart, as John Wesley would have called it, was intense and passionate. What Lydia received, we can be sure, was glorious; that she found Jesus her Lord was certain, but the Spirit in her heart did not turn her in on herself—that's what Luther called sin, the self turning in on itself. The Spirit in her heart was so much bigger than her self-interest that it wasn't even mentioned. Though Lydia's heart was surely moved, and though there can be no question that she experienced joy unlike any she had known before, her instinctive response to it all was to invite Paul and his company home to dinner and a place to sleep. It reminds me of Hurricane Grove.

And generosity became the trademark of the Philippian church. We know from Paul's own letters that over the years the church in Philippi funded his missionary endeavors like no other. It was a sign of their faith. Indeed, Lydia says to Paul, "If you consider me to be a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house."

Our passage this morning from the Gospel of John echoes the theme. Jesus says, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my word, and my Father will love him, and he will come to him and take up residence with him." In one way Jesus is speaking metaphorically. If you love Jesus, the Father will take up residence with you. But metaphors always get their meaning from concrete, real experience. Deeply embedded in the heart of Christianity is faith that expresses itself in hospitality. So profound is the symbol, that even God receives the hospitality of the faithful, even God comes home to dinner and takes a room in the house. In the heart of the faithful, there is room in the inn for God. The God who promises us a house with many rooms has also come home with us and stayed in our rooms.

Just how deep is this theme of acting hospitably? It is the very core of the Gospel. Look at Jesus' words. "If anyone loves me, he will obey my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and take up residence with him." He will obey my word. And obeying quite simply means hospitality.

At the end of the Gospel of John, after the resurrection, Jesus is speaking to Peter. Jesus says to Peter, "Do you love me?" Peter answers, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs."<sup>16</sup> A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep."<sup>17</sup> He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep."<sup>1</sup>

Faith and the sign of faith are the same thing—Come home for dinner. The offer of hospitality and acceptance of the offer are the act of faith, and it is also its official

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, Jn 21:15–17 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).

acknowledgment. Loving God and loving your neighbor cannot be separated. And they are expressed by finding home in God and one another. And I remember Hurricane Grove.

\*\*\* So, what a surprise. Here we are on Mother's Day talking about love. Love in action. Love as the sign and seal of faith. Love as hospitality and generosity. And yet I wonder if some of you might be just a bit uneasy. First of all, few of our families fit the Hallmark image of love. In fact, this day is a bit of a setup, isn't it? As parents we've disappointed our own best intentions. As children we've been hurt by our parents, some of us badly. Some of us have wanted to be parents, and it hasn't happened for any number of reasons, and this day's holding up mothers as the paradigm for expressing love and affection feels like just another slap in the face. On this day we do well to take care to notice the real limitations the Hallmark version of the holiday has.

Others of you may be uneasy about holding up the notion of hospitality as the act and proof of faith for another reason. Sometimes hospitality can sound sacrificial, self-denying. Feminists have long helped us see the pitfall here. Today's story of Lydia memorializes a woman whose faith was expressed by turning her house into a bed and breakfast for Paul and the others. My mother used to have to remind me from time to time that our house wasn't just a hotel and a restaurant for my convenience. If we dig just below the surface of Lydia's story, do we find a tale of exploitation rather than a story of new life in Christ? Is hospitality just a nicer word, a euphemism, for doormat?

We must be very careful here. Jesus says, "If you love me, feed my sheep." He also says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Many have noted that he didn't say love your neighbor instead of yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. And self-care has become quite an industry. And I'm not opposed to it. But I do think that in our culture we can too quickly equate self-centeredness with self-love and self-care. In fact, most of what I've seen described as self-care falls prey to this misunderstanding. And there's one huge problem. Self-centeredness is not particularly nurturing, or loving or caring to oneself. We human beings consume more than the planet can sustain. We fill our waters with crude oil. We proclaim Jihad, holy hatred, on our fellow creatures. We run after more money, more recognition, more sex, more beauty, more youth, and more things—as if these things will cure the sin-sick soul. Affluenza, it's a good term made up recently to describe the disease people have who believe that more affluence, more things, more attention, more self-centeredness are all we need to better love ourselves and find fulfillment in our lives. Hogwash.

If we were to imagine a pole with self-love at one end, do you know what would be at the other end, the polar opposite of self-love? It would be narcissism, self-centeredness. The self turned in on itself is like nothing so much as it is like self-hatred. The stuff—the money, things and all that—they're just a drug to try to keep it at bay. Self-love and self-centeredness are about as far apart as you can get.

We are creatures made for relationship. Adam was so lonely that God had to make Eve. Many theologians have understood the fall not as the result of some bad thing done, but as the rupturing of the relationship between ourselves and God, alienation at the most profound level. We are made to be in relationship with God and with one another. Love of God and love of others and love of ourselves cannot even be separated. If they aren't one and the same, then they are so intimately linked that breaking the bond to one of them breaks the bonds to the other two. They are symbiotic, not opposed.

There's a great old story about a man who was shown heaven and hell. His guide said, "Let's look at hell first." They came into a room. A magnificent banquet was set out on the

table. The food was exquisite and bountiful. But the people were thin and in anguish. The man asked the guide why it was so, and the guide pointed to the people's elbows. Their arms were straight and stiff. Their elbows couldn't bend. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get the food into their mouths. It was hell. Like Coleridge's old mariner, food, food, everywhere, but not a morsel to eat.

Next they went to heaven. The room was exactly the same. The table was sumptuous. The people sat at the table, and they could not bend their arms. But here the people were in joyful conversation and eating. The banquet was a delight. For the people, though they could not feed themselves, found that they could feed each other. They couldn't bend their arms to their own mouths, but they could fill their forks with food and extend them to one another. Feed my sheep. Come home with me for dinner. Hurricane Grove. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; I do not give it to you as the world does. Amen.