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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible VIII. Small Steps

Acts 16:9-16 NRSV 9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 When 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. 11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, 12 and 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. 13 On 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. 14 A 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. 15 When 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.

We've probably all seen those motivational posters in someone's home or office, or which show up from time to time on our Facebook feeds that say "The longest journey begins with a single step" or "Big journeys begin with small steps." The cynic might respond, "Well, duh" since read very literally they really are, as my philosophy professor used to say, "penetrating glances into the obvious." The less cynical realize that on occasion we all need a reminder that even a daunting task indeed must begin somewhere and must begin with a small, sometimes hesitating, first small step. The preacher sits before the word processor on Thursday or Friday – or God help him – sometimes on Saturday night and that blank page populated only by a blinking cursor is an anxious reminder that the only way to begin is to begin. The writer Ann Lamott tells a childhood story of her brother waiting until the night before a huge assignment to do a report on a number of birds, sitting immobilized at the kitchen table in front of a blank sheet of paper, and their father gently saying just take it "bird by bird, bird by bird."¹

¹Cf. http://engl210-picetti.wikispaces.umb.edu/file/view/Lamott_Bird+by+Bird.pdf

But small steps all by themselves as unavoidably necessary as they are, are not by themselves enough. On the last night of Jesus' earthly life, the disciples began with small steps when they all fled from Him when he was arrested. Peter took small steps later that evening when he denied Jesus not once but three times and then fled from that courtyard where he had done so in shame. And if you were to plot on a map the journey that Paul takes that is reflected in our scripture this morning – and especially if you add to it the places he went that are described in the verses before what Matt read, Phrygia, Galatia, Mysia, Bythnia, and Troas – it looks like the directions a dim-witted GPS would plot for you, or the path Barbara's and my cat once made crossing the room after she had managed to drink half a glass of wine. In fact, one commentator put this point this way: "Just prior to the beginning of this [scripture], Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy seem to be at a loss for where to go next with the gospel. They stumble around the region, running into one barrier after another...."²

But then they stop stumbling. They continue to take small steps on their continued journey but now they do so with conviction, single-mindedness, and, as it turns out, effectiveness. What made the difference? – a difference reflected in our scripture this morning as Paul and his companions now take the gospel to Europe for the first time, a decision and a direction that – just as when Mark and Matthew took the gospel to Africa – ensured that Christianity would indeed be able to spread and not just become another footnote in the history of religion. Just this: now their steps are pointed in the right direction. *Their steps are pointed in the right direction.* And Paul was able to move in those new and effective directions for three reasons.

First, he didn't let his comfortableness trump his calling. Some scholars have wondered why Paul spent so much time early in his ministry in Asia Minor (what we now call Turkey). Paul seemed to have a clarity early on that he wanted to take the Gospel

²http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1627

far past the boundaries of Israel and yet he meandered around Asia Minor more than would have seemed necessary. Well, do you remember where Paul is from? The city of Tarsus. A city in – you guessed it – Asia Minor. He knew the region, he had friends and likely family nearby. It was known territory. But God called Paul – just as God sometimes calls you and me – to concede that his comfort was at odds with his commission. He knew that God had tapped him to be the “apostle to the Gentiles” – that is, the folks beyond Israel – and that to truly be effective, to truly live out that commission, he would need to take that call into the very heart of the Empire, into Europe. But for the longest time he didn’t; he dilly-dallied around Asia Minor doing good work but not the work to which God was ultimately calling him. No, to do that he had to point his steps, his small but necessary steps, across the Aegean Sea and take his road trip into Macedonia and Greece, the cultural heart of the Roman Empire. He had to trustingly decide to abandon his comfort in what he had known and move into the unknown.

Second – and relatedly – that “unknown” would turn out to be a place badly in need of the Good News of God’s gracious love for each and all but, at the same time, often hostile to that news that Paul would bring. There’s a little phrase in our reading for this morning that you may have passed over when it says Paul went to Philippi, “a Roman colony.” A Roman colony. It’s the only time the phrase is used. And what it suggests is that, indeed, as Dorothy said to Toto, “we’re not in Kansas anymore,” we’re not in an area that had already been long-exposed to the Jewish values out of which the life and message of Jesus grew. No, now Paul is in a decidedly different, a decidedly uncomfortable place that yet stands so in need – an Empire that routinely practiced the infanticide of female babies, an Empire that increasingly found its entertainment in viewing the pain of other human beings, an Empire that sharply divided on class lines with the rich seeing it as their right to abuse the poor, and Empire where

those who had the fortune to be born as “citizens” had little clue about just how very powerful and privileged that fact made them. But for those who are the beneficiaries of privilege and power – whether in that day or now – will not see a Gospel, as one preacher puts it, “that says ‘no’ to the ways of imperial power and offers a different way of life, a different story, and a different promise”³ as good news for they would prefer to cling, knowingly or unknowingly, to that privilege and that power. And so Paul pointed his steps into the midst of such a situation, right into the heart of where there was the most need and the most hostility, and courageously spoke the Truth about a God who indeed loves, values, and cares for each and all, where there is, as he puts it, “neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28), and where privilege is the privilege to serve the poor, the outcast, the abused, and the broken.

Finally, third, the small and then large steps that Paul took included the willingness to go beyond “the rules” and see God at work in unexpected places. For that is exactly what happened in the story of Paul’s encounter with Lydia. When he arrived at Philippi, Paul’s steps took him not, as had been his custom throughout Asia Minor, to the synagogue, but to what one writer calls a “fringe area” on the edge of town, not even within the city but outside its gates.⁴ And then there comes this extraordinary sentence: “we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.” It’s extraordinary for two reasons: First, remember that in Paul’s initial vision, it was “a Macedonian man” who reminded Paul of the need in Europe and of the direction his steps needed to head but when he arrives it is not “a man” but a gathering of women, none of them Macedonian, who are the first hearers of the first preaching on the European continent. And secondly, well, they were women! Paul sometimes justifiably gets a bad rap from some of things he says elsewhere about particular

³http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1627

⁴Cf. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=584

women, but it is also well worth noting that in this instance he makes no distinction and truly lives out what he preaches. Unlike the first time Barbara and I bought a car together and the salesman told her “Little lady, let’s wait for your husband so he can explain things to you” (we did not buy a car from him), Paul crossed over the cultural expectations, the implicit rules, and defied his own upbringing to speak and preach directly to women. And then Paul’s steps, small and large, in the right but unexpected directions led him to accept Lyida’s offer that he and his companions stay with her. She in turn, then, one who was also taking her own small steps but longing for a new direction, became forever known as the first European Christian and thereby the mother of the faith of all those who trace their ancestry to Europe. Who would have ever expected all that?!? And it only happened because Paul was indeed willing to scrap “the rules” and seek after God in the unexpected.

One preacher says this about our story this morning:

The Acts reading reminds us that God’s providence lures us beyond the familiar and invites us to push the boundaries... to embody God’s life-transforming good news.... Everything we do should shine Christ’s light for the glory of God and the well-being of our brothers and sisters.⁵

With that in mind, let me suggest that the spirit of this story also asks of you this morning: Where in your life are your small steps not seeming to go anywhere? Do you have a new direction that you need to point your steps in? Have you become too comfortable and find yourself yearning for something more, yearning to find a calling for your gifts that truly satisfies? Have you become aware of how privileged you are because of your race or your ethnicity or your orientation or your possessions, knowing

⁵<http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2013/05/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-sixth-sunday-of-easter/>

that even the poorest among us are far richer than 95% of the world and that almost all of us know where we shall sleep and when we shall next eat? Does your heart ache for those around you who may even be hostile to the Christian message because they have been abused with hateful distortions of it and you find yourself yearning to proclaim a God of gentle grace to them? Do you find yourself wanting to be surprised, to break out of what is comfortable, to be more a vehicle for the love of God?

My friends, if any of those questions are your questions then listen up and look around: for if you look closely you'll see your own "man or woman from Macedonia" calling your name, saying come on over, saying we need your help. And when you do, where will your steps, your small but oh-so-significant steps, take you?