

First Followers

A Sermon on Acts 16:9-21 for Confirmation Sunday--Rev. Ashley Grant
May 1, 2016--First United Church of Christ, Congregational

Our passage in Acts, follows a vivid series of visions and travels of Paul and fellow Jesus-followers. The book of Acts is the church's coming of age story—from: beliefs and practices, to a who's who list of First Followers. It is a coming **to** faith story for famous or infamous apostles, and it offers revelation after revelation of steps toward growth.

The vision here in chapter 16, while Paul is in Troas, which is in modern-day Turkey, follows a couple more visions where Paul had been directed NOT to go into Asia. The vision makes me think of Princess Leia, whose hologram pops up from R2D2: "Help me, Obi-won; you're my only Hope." Here though, the plea comes from a man of Macedonia, across the Aegean Sea—in Europe. Maybe you've seen maps on the news lately of this area and refugee camps.

In Macedonia, Paul meets an interesting woman, Lydia, who dealt in purple cloth. I don't want you to forget her...

Hear now, Luke's story that started in Troas--

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 Paul 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.

Prayer: Wrap us in this story, God, who loves us first. Amen.

I. My dear Confirmands, let me tell about your first followers.

Hannah, Julie and Kyle, your first followers would take you to the playground. Alexa, Tyler and Molly, they would buckle you in your swing and push you, gently, probably still holding on. Bridget, Elle and Cameron, later they would help you climb the ladder to the top of the slide, and chances are, they were climbing right after you. At the top, Shane, Amanda and Ally, they would sit you on their lap and slide down with you.

You, my dear Confirmands, squealed with delight, for in that stunning moment of adventure, your first follower held you tightly, wrapping their arms around you; they kept you safe and you knew nothing of the risk.

Pretty soon, you were racing around the playground; you were up the ladder faster than the one on your heels. At the top of the slide, you were brave enough to go by yourself. Your first followers, found themselves in that conundrum:

If I let you go, no one will be down there to catch you;

If I let you go, and you make it, you might get away at the bottom, and I won't be able to keep up with you.

You saw adventure, primed to fly; your first followers saw risk...

Stay up there a while....

II. My dear church, Confirmands know more about following than you might think—

Confirmands, How many followers do you have? You know, on Instagram or Snapchat? 1100, 358, 1600, 1200...

They know the strategies of creating a following...First, follow... Comment on others' posts...post cool pics....have someone send a "shout out" ... Stay Active...

The Apostle Paul is like one of you, Confirmands, maybe a first Confirmand. I say 1 of the first because those firsts are important: like if you trace back to the 1st twitter accounts and find @Jack.

Anybody follow @jack? No... I had to learn about @Jack, who started tweeting in 2006. The interesting thing about why he continued tweeting, continued following—he said that in those early days, if he was not active on his account for 24 hours, he would get a virtual poke—a message would pop up: "what are you up to?" It would prompt him, remind him...

If you are confused by this, then **you and I** are not unlike the people whom the Apostle Paul encountered in his (known or unknown) attempts to create a following...

Let me put this into context for everyone who prefers to shut down when social media jibber jabber starts...

- 1.) Who remembers the first family in your neighborhood to get a colored TV—Raise your hand!
- 2.) First friend to get a VCR? Raise your hand.
- 3.) First person to carry around a pager.

- 4.) First person you knew who got a bag phone for their car?
- 5.) First person you knew who got an email account, and they said, "if you get one, I can write to you and you can write back to me; let me write down my address for you."
- 6.) Who was the first person you know who jumped on "The Facebook," that was what Mark Z used to call it. Within a year of its creation, those founders/creators had a vision to open it up on the international scene. Sorta Biblical. Well, let's say, "they created a following."
- 7.) Now, the first person you know who got an Instagram or snapchat account?

Firsts are important. Some see risk, different, unknown....take a "wait and see" or "this too shall pass" approach. Some see adventure, new, potential, and follow.

Who remembers your first follower? I knew my grandmother was one of my first followers when I found stories of me in her old letters, and when I opened her file cabinet last week, found a stack of newspaper articles and program bulletins from 20 + years ago...about me. She kept it all. Who was your first follower? Was it your dad, mom, grandmother, your older brother? Were they keeping track of you? (Good) Brave indeed are those willing to navigate the gauntlet of settings to follow you into the murky waters of Instagram. [My mom said, "Ah...every grandmother who wants to keep up with her grandchildren needs an Instagram account. Like Duh."]

First followers are important. (They prime the system.) There's a site that can find your first follower, by tracing back? But maybe you already know yours. There are even apps that will increase your following...if only the early church had such a tool.

III. Instead, the church had Paul, a newly confirmed follower of Jesus. Let me tell you about one of Jesus' first followers: Paul.

Paul had a vision of Jesus; Scared the devil out of him, when Jesus appears on the Damascus road and said, "why are you persecuting me?" That brute Paul is directed to go to Damascus where he will find his Confirmation mentor. I am sure in that first year he learns all about Jesus's ministry; he's won over and learns that loving God means taking care of those who are weak, and when you mess up, you ask for forgiveness...Maybe he picked up more than we were able to cover in our 1st year of confirmation.

He then wants to follow the Jerusalem Jesus followers, like Peter.

But—Church, they are leery because this Paul has such a bad track record—he watched the stoning of poor Stephen; he tried to cut off Jesus followers—the old-fashioned way! before that vision hit him like a ton of bricks. The Jews who follow Jesus, fearful still, chase him out of town.

Would you have followed Paul? Not me!

Paul runs home (to Tarsus), where Barnabus finds him and takes him to Antioch, and for a whole year (we'll call it Confirmation 2 year), they had confirmation sessions with churches and taught gobs of people.

This is where I **imagine** Paul had his final Confirmation project: to come up with a hip/edgy name to call the group. Some said, "Fisherman"—but that got vetoed by the farmers and tent-makers. "Cross-Walkers;" too morbid. Messiahians —weird. Ew! Paul **perhaps** suggests, "Christian" ---ah! Catchy.

Paul is eventually confirmed/commissioned; he gets marching orders through Visions from the Holy Spirit. If you read all of Acts, which I commend to you, the visions won't surprise you.

Visions are those frequent, divine pokes, revelations, reminders:

- 1.) You are my child, my beloved.
- 2.) Go this way; but don't go that way.
- 3.) Hey, what are you doing?

Paul is in Troas, on the coast. He has good co-followers: Silas, Timothy, Luke. Great to have good folks on the journey with you! Right Confirmands? Paul has that Princess Leia style vision, "Help, come to Macedonia, you are our only hope." Time to open it up on the international scene.

This is a big step. But, Paul doesn't bat an eyelash. "Sign me up." Some think, "It's dangerous. Another continent. Another culture; religious system. Who will take care you?" Paul says, "I'm ready. Have you seen what I have been through to get ready?"

So Paul, with his fellow-followers, travels. Samothrace. Neapolis, Phillipi.

On the Sabbath, they walk out of city gates at Phillipi; go down to the river on the hunch that there is a holy place; find women gathered for prayer, and they start talking.

Paul speaks; maybe it sounds like Adams' lesson on the "Marks of the Church" or Christian's "snowball game on religions." Maybe it's Paul's story of being a Roman (outside this town of retired Roman Officers) and a repentant, former-persecutor of Jesus-followers, who, **now**, by God's grace alone, whole-heartedly follows God.

Lydia hears!—

IV. Let me tell you about Lydia, this First Follower in Europe.

God has already been working on Lydia, just as God had been guiding Paul. Lydia's profile is laid out in these few verses: we know of her expensive purple material business; she is probably wrapped in a Purple robe, and her servants probably have purple dye splotches on their tunics and purple accents to

their head scarves; we know of her extended household and where she's from; we know she is welcoming; we know she is already a WORSHIPPER of God; we know that it is out of the ordinary for her to be the one extending invitations and making the decisions for a whole household. We know God opened her heart to hear what Paul had to say.

Followers are looking for direction, seeking; and Lydia finds God's answer in Paul's spiel. "Like with love," clicks Lydia. "We'll have a round of that," she says. Everyone in her household is baptized.

Many reasons to love Lydia. "Come to my house," she persuades them. Later on Paul gets in his usual incarceration trouble. Miraculously he gets out, as usual, and vs. 40 says, "After leaving prison, they went to Lydia's home." He'll write about Lydia's faithful following and support in upcoming letters...

Who knows a Follower like Lydia? Heart open to God, and hands ready to help.

The one who encouraged you, who supported you. Who knew you made mistakes, but knew those mistakes didn't define you. The one whose love felt like being wrapped in luxurious purple cloth that you neither deserved nor could afford, but she gave it anyway. Lydia follows and she takes care of Paul, when his own family of faith and blood can't.

V. Oh, you are still up there, Confirmands, at the top the slide.

If we don't let you go, we'll be holding a bunch of 15 and 16 years olds in our congregational lap, forever, and that will be ridiculous!

Confirmation is the moment we let go. You confirm your beliefs, and we take your word for it. We, who love you, Confirmands—who have set out on your journey of faith-gathering, discernment and adventure, we are invested in this effort for you because we aren't going to be able to follow you around and be your religious and spiritual pop-

up reminders: "hey, haven't heard you pray in the last 24 hours. Just checking in. What are you doing?"

We want the practices you've learned to be ingrained, the sensations of worship to be so vivid that your foundational self, your spirit: formed and nurtured by love, witness, hymns, stories, pageants, coffee hour, fellowship, Sunday School and acrostic poems, takes over as you slide into living God's good news, following where and to what God calls you. (Not that we want you to hop the next flight to Macedonia.)

We—your first followers--hold the sacred risk of Confirmation together, with three hopes:

1. That you are prepared to meet the challenges and joys out there.
2. That you know you have a loving community rooting for you.
3. That when you have gone beyond our physical reach, others will be there to take care of you: those Lydias, those purple cloth dealers, those worshippers of God.

We are on the verge of letting you go so that you might follow by choice...the one who opens our hearts. Amen.