

Sermon for Sunday, August 7, 2022
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Traveling With the Spirit - "Travel to New Places"
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

Acts 16:6-15

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

This week I've been fascinated by a strange idea in our reading today. The Holy Spirit forbid Paul and his companion to speak the word in Asia? And that same Spirit of Jesus didn't allow them to go into a place called Bithynia?

I have so many questions about that. How exactly did the Spirit forbid them from entering those places? How did the Spirit tell them to stay away?

As I think about my own life, I wonder if there were times the Spirit was trying to tell me: Just don't go there, really trust me, don't go there. And, I just ignored the message and barreled right into where I had no business being.

I also wonder why the Spirit would forbid them from going to those places. The book of Acts begins with the promise that the apostles will be Jesus' witnesses "in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). That would seem to include Asia and Bithynia. Doesn't God want everyone to know the good news of Jesus? Why would the Spirit stop them from doing something good, from caring for God's children in those places?

Unless, maybe there was someone else who could go to Asia and Bithynia. Maybe, Paul and his companion didn't have to do everything themselves. Maybe we too should remember we don't have to do all the things, even if they are all good things. Maybe we should listen to the Spirit's guidance about what is ours to do.

I think this is especially important in our internet age when we know so much about all the pain around the world. Preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber describes this so well. I heard her say recently, "I don't think the human psyche was developed to be able to hold all the information that's available to us right now—in terms of every form of injustice and violence and human suffering that happens all across the planet. Our psyches were developed to be able to hold whatever suffering happened in our village. We can handle that, we can extend ourselves emotionally towards that. But how do we extend ourselves emotionally towards every single form of it across the planet? We can't. And so we need trust that not everything is ours to care about. It doesn't mean it's not worthy to be cared about by someone, but I constantly ask myself, 'What's mine to do? And what's somebody else's?' It feels callous, but we can't hold it all."¹

I so appreciate her wisdom. Yet I still wonder, how do we discern what is ours to do and what is not? How do we listen to the guidance of the Spirit about where to go, what to do, where to focus our energy?

¹ <https://www.theisolationjournals.com/blog/nadiabolzweber>

This week I was fascinated to discover that it may have been physical illness that prevented Paul and his companion from going to Asia. Our reading today says that they went to Phrygia and Galatia because the Spirit forbid them from going to Asia. And in his letter to the Galatians, Paul says "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you." So, it may be that Paul got sick, couldn't go to Asia, and so instead ended up in Galatia.

That got my attention because I spent my sabbatical studying how God works in our bodies to communicate with us. I explored the holy guidance and deep wisdom we can access when we tune into our bodies.

As we discern next steps on our journeys and what is ours to do, it's helpful to pay attention within. It's helpful to ponder a possible course of action and notice what emerges in our bodies. If we feel constricted and anxious, if we feel like we must act or no one else will, if we feel drained and depleted, perhaps that step, that action is not for us. If we sense energy and openness, flow, release of tension, an inner lift, it may be time to move ahead. Of course, sometimes we just have to do things that leave us feeling tense or depleted. In those instances, tuning into our bodies can help us settle them and activate them as needed.

Certainly, there are other sources of wisdom - scripture, community, our core values, reason. Yet Christianity and Western culture have tended to ignore the wisdom of the body, even fostering suspicion and distrust of the body. But it is in our body that we experience commitment, motivation, connection, calm, energy - essential elements for following where God's Spirit leads us, for loving others and creation.

God cares about our bodies.

God became a body in Christ Jesus and lives now in our bodies through the power of the Holy Spirit.

God is present today to nurture your body through word and meal, song and community.

God is at work in your body to lead and guide you always.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.