

Emmaus Road Mennonite Fellowship  
May 9, 2010  
Anita Rediger

“Outside The Gate”  
Acts 16:11-15

“Gates”... I wonder what pops into mind when you hear the word “gate?” Perhaps, you picture a rustic wrought iron gate or one that is part of a white picket fence – something elegant or quaint. Well, when I hear the word “gate,” a very different image comes to mind. When we talk about gates at our house it is sometimes a very *touchy* subject! (I’d really like to invite Martin to come forward for a bit of an interview regarding gates!)

Growing up in ranch country, gates were a very small part of the miles and miles of fencing that marked the boundary of the pastures. They were often made of barbed wire reinforced with native posts. I have fond memories of “checking tanks” with my father, getting out opening the gate so that he could drive through into the pasture. Of course, after he passed through, it was my job to close the gate! The gate fastened with the rattle of a chain and snap - and off we went again.

Life on the dairy farm in Indiana, I very quickly learned, was oh, so very different, from life in the West. Cattle lived in barns; they didn’t roam around in big pastures. Barns and small pens needed sturdy wooden or heavy, metal gates. And because they were much more confined, nearly every pen had a curious cow or calf that seemed to be in charge of “checking” the gate! In the past 30 years, Martin, I wonder how many times, we’ve found cattle “outside the gate” (especially when *someone* prefers baler twine over chains and snaps! Hmmm...)

“Gates”... they have a variety of connotations...depending on which side you perceive yourself to be! Shut in or shut out... gates...something to force open or something to keep closed...(just think of those heifers who always keep a keen on eye on *my* garden!)

As I’ve studied for this evening’s sermon, it is this expression about going “outside the gate” that jumped at out me each time I read the text. Jim read for us that on the Sabbath day, Paul and his entourage “went *outside the gate*, where they supposed there was a place of prayer.”

Paul and Silas have arrived in Philippi. But it hasn’t been easy going; actually they hadn’t even intended to be in Philippi! What are they doing there! Let’s back up and take a look at what has happened in the previous weeks. Perhaps, the realities, the frustrations... the opportunities and experiences of these early believers will give us insight into our experience of “being church” today.

Paul and Silas have arrived in Philippi. Note that it’s not Paul and Barnabas, but at this point, Paul & Silas. Although theologically compatible, Paul and Barnabas hadn’t seen eye to eye about including John Mark in their itinerary. Paul felt John Mark had deserted

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them on the last journey...just when the going got tough. Barnabas, however, had a different opinion, and hadn't Barnabas been the one who had made it possible for Paul to get a start among the Jesus followers in the first place? Perhaps he felt that Paul "owed him one." At any rate, instead of one delegation, now there were two.

As Barnabas and John Mark sail away to Cyprus; Paul and Silas head north toward Syria. When they arrive in Lystra, they meet up with a young man named Timothy; an interesting fellow, a young man from a mixed marriage. His mother – a Jewish woman - was a believer and his father a Greek. (Remember Eunice & Lois?) Timothy, this man of mixed ethnicity, joins Paul and Silas - However, even though Paul was fresh from the Jerusalem council which had just decided that circumcision was NOT a requirement for believers, the first thing that Paul asks of Timothy is that he be circumcised!

What??? It appears that not everyone was in agreement with the council in Jerusalem! Realistically, how could they be? Wasn't that the whole point of this new journey...to "return and visit the believers and see how they are doing," and to bring word of the council in Jerusalem that had discerned that it wasn't necessary to "burden" the Gentiles with requirements of circumcision?

As we consider this, we get a fuller glimpse of the dynamics of the early church – a glimpse that looks very familiar to us, as well. Among the first believers:

- Geography mattered – what one believed was influenced by where one lived. Discussions held in Jerusalem differed from those in Galatia. A important part of Paul's travels was building connection among these diverse communities.
- Ethnicity mattered – how one practiced faith was influenced by the story of one's past. A Jewish believer viewed faith from a different vantage point than a believer of Greek ancestry.

The far-flung communities of the early church were different from one another. So as Timothy sets out with Paul, he makes cultural adjustments to accommodate the sensibilities of those whom he would encounter. Out of deference to those who simply could not imagine a Jewish man being uncircumcised, Timothy chooses circumcision.

Things went well for awhile, "they went from town to town...the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily." Soon, however, (begin with 16:6) the travelers began running into "dead ends." How could this be? The man who had had a life-changing encounter with Jesus himself... baffled... ???!! I like it! If Paul – the great apostle – was puzzled about next steps, well then...I guess we can consider ourselves in good company when doors seem to close before us.

I wonder about the mood of the travelers as they arrived in Troas – tired, discouraged...stymied...??? Did they wonder... now what? Or what's next? So...Paul goes to bed. (I can relate to that, too!) In these night-time hours, Paul has a vision. It is a

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vision of a man pleading for them to come to Macedonia...actually the *opposite* direction they had been attempting to go. “Immediately” (whew) the group gathered their things and set sail from Troas...taking a straight course to Samothrace and ending up in the Roman colony of Philippi – an outpost of the Roman empire in Europe.

We read that they had been in Philippi several days. No insights are shared with us about those days. But on the Sabbath the travelers sought out a place of prayer.

Now, the narrative suddenly comes alive with detail! Seeking a place of prayer took the travelers outside of the city gate (the one by the river). Here, the men met up with a group of women who had also gathered in this quiet place. No one had planned for this meeting. No one had put up posters to invite strangers. Yet, on this *particular* Sabbath day, these *particular* persons find themselves in conversation. Unscheduled, unplanned...unlikely...remember, just a few weeks ago these men were headed with best of intentions eastward to Asia!

This isn't the first surprising encounter related to us in the Acts. Patterns of unlikely persons meeting up with one another unfold throughout Luke's account:

- Philip – finding himself on the wilderness road between Jerusalem and Gaza – climbs into the Ethiopian's chariot – to discuss the Isaiah passage – the chariot of a eunuch, no less...a person who – due to his physical condition - would never qualify to enter the temple. When he asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized...” Philip welcomes him into the kingdom. See Deut. 23: 1 Acts 8:26
- Ananias – a disciple at home in Damascus – who know as about the zealous Pharisee, who was “ravaging the church, dragging off both men and women trusts the Spirit's prompting to go down the street to meet with Saul,” Acts 9:10
- Peter – the man who only hours before had said – “no way” Lord, I won't come near any unclean animal, has enough imagination to go with Cornelius's men (Cornelius, a God-fearing centurion of the Italian Cohort) simply because Cornelius wanted to hear what he had to say. (What an interesting invitation! No hint about topic or theme!) Acts 10:1
- And now, in Philippi – Paul, Silas, Timothy and perhaps, Luke himself, sit down - not in a tight exclusive, circle all to themselves - but in a posture that allowed conversation to unfold...first with a “gathering of women” and then broadening the conversation to include a women named Lydia, “who was listening”....and “listening eagerly!” Acts 16:16

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- Who knows how much time transpires, but our reading ends with Gentile Lydia – and her baptized household, now hosting the Jewish travelers – in her home, with her practices, with her understanding of faith. Acts 16:14

The message for this evening started with tonight's reading, the description of a simple meeting outside of a city gate. The larger story which I've related describes the reality of gates of a different nature – barriers of frustration and fear, walls of ethnic distinction and gender differences. More importantly, these layers of stories are accounts of a repeated pattern of unlikely, cultural & spiritual openness. Again and again, old, assumed divisions are revisited and breached...and look what happened!!! Newness of life – everywhere...that is, on both sides of the gate!

Authentic mission is always a response to a need within the community – and not just what *we* think someone else needs. It's fascinating to note that in each of these stories the Spirit has been at work long before the “missionary” ever even arrived. As we follow Jesus, who knows where we'll end up! As we listen to the Spirit, who knows who will show up for us “at just the right time.” As we seek after the way of Jesus, who knows what surprising company we'll find ourselves keeping! Who knows how our lives will be challenged *and* enriched!

If we allow ourselves to go “outside the gate” don't you wonder who might be waiting? And... if *we're* the ones “on the outside” who knows when unexpected visitors might arrive?!! Thanks be to God!