

**Stories of Transformation - From Outside to Inside
5-9-10**

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Acts 16:9-15

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 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. 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.

One of the adult learning options on Sunday morning for the last twelve weeks has been a DVD study on the life and teachings of the Apostle Paul. In that study, they expound upon a phrase we find in the

scripture that I just read. Lydia is called "a worshiper of God." That means little to us today. That phrase could easily go unnoticed and seem unimportant. But apparently that term was given to people who were not Jewish, but who showed up at the synagogue because they found something interesting or compelling in the teachings. These "worshippers of God" did not adhere to Jewish law, they did not consider themselves Jews, nor did the Jews consider them inside the faith. They were on the periphery... the margins... the sidelines.

Remember that Paul at one time had been Saul. On the inside of the faith community, and an enforcer of religious law and a persecutor of those who didn't toe the line, like Jews who were Jesus followers. Saul rounded them up and took them to be disciplined. And now, here he is, Paul, encountering Lydia, not a Jew, but a "worshiper of God". Paul must have been a great story teller - very persuasive and passionate in his belief that the way of Jesus was life-changing - because Lydia and her household decided to follow Jesus and be baptized. Now these people, these "worshippers of God" who had been

on the margins, outsiders, were now part of the family of followers. Their lives were transformed from outsiders to insiders. It's not that they became different people. They didn't convert to Judaism. They simply decided to follow the way of Jesus, and were now part of the community. Lydia must have known this because she invites the other Jesus followers to come and stay with her. They were all part of the family now.

You've probably heard the metaphor of family used to describe the church. Sometimes we talk about the faith family. Christians through the ages have sometimes called one another brother and sister to reinforce the sense that we are all God's children; brothers and sisters in Christ. We are related not by blood, or family name, or ancestral lineage, but through Christ who connects us as parts of one body. The metaphor of family can be a good one as long as we distinguish it from other kinds of families. Families traditionally are not something you can choose into. It is your right by birth. You might be able to opt out of it, but it is nearly impossible to opt in. Well the

same can hold true for the family of faith as long as we acknowledge that we are all children of God. Therefore, you and I don't choose who's in and who's out. It's more like a "Ya'll come!" kind of a thing. Anyone who wants to be part of the community of Christ is welcome and is an insider. You don't have to go through any tests. You don't have to prove yourself. If you desire to claim your status as God's child, you're one of us; part of the family; worthy of care and love and expected to share love and care as well.

Here at First Christian Church we have a motto, "Come as you are, you belong." And we mean it. It doesn't mean you won't be changed as you encounter this community of faith, and it doesn't mean we won't be changed by you. It does mean that you don't have to prove anything or swear to anything to belong to this community of people loved by God, attempting to live out of that love as we follow the way of Jesus and encourage one another along the way.

Today we have said good-bye to dear loved ones who are moving away. We have tried to strengthen the bonds between us so that our

connections will remain strong. Today we have honored two people graduating from High School. The Teaching Ministry of this congregation met with each of them to make sure Ryan and Nikki have the opportunity, on the eve of their moving into adulthood, of strengthening their relationship to this family of faith so that as they journey through life, the ties that bind our hearts in Christian love will be felt in a real and strong way that will hopefully stand throughout their lives.

We have heard the story of a difficult time in the life of a beloved member and sister in Christ who faced a tragic loss that no one should have to face - the death of a child. Yet, because of how God transformed that moment, Diane Neal has shared music, and songs, and words of encouragement, and healing stories, and so many hugs with the family of faith we call First Christian Church. And that has allowed others to realize that they are not outsiders, but, through God's transforming power and through our common story as God's

beloved children, we are insiders, together, members of the one body of Christ.

This is Mother's Day. And we certainly want to celebrate those who gave us birth. But Jesus' idea about family was a bit different and got him into trouble sometimes. Matthew's gospel tells of a time when Jesus was speaking to the crowds. His mother and brothers came, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." ⁴⁸But... Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of [God] is my brother and sister and mother." **Matthew 12:46-50** I don't think Jesus was being disrespectful to his mother. Rather, he was trying to make a point about a new kind of family - the family of God that can include orphans and widows and people who are outcast; the family of God that shares freely the love and care of a great and grace-filled God whose love knows no bounds. Tim and I have friends who are folk singers. They

sing a song with the words, "there's always room for more at mama's table." Maybe you've known families like that. Anyone who walks through the door is instantly a family member, welcome, loved, fed, and celebrated. That's the vision of the call of the church. Come as you are! You belong! There are no strangers around here. Amen.