

Opened Hearts

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
July 24, 2016
Text: Act 16:1-15

“On the road again” – the title and first line of a very famous country song written by no less than Willie Nelson and Johnny Cash. It captures uniquely the vagabond nature of contemporary American society, so much so that its familiar lyrics remain beloved to millions, more than three decades after its initial release by Willie Nelson in 1980.

On the road again

Just can't wait to get on the road again

The life I love is makin' music with my friends

And I can't wait to get on the road again.

That’s pretty much the gist of the whole song, captured in the refrain which keeps repeating and repeating with an occasional bridge verse about the life of a gypsy on the road. Not too profound. Not too sad or angry or dark. Also not overly happy or sappy. But it is filled with hopeful expectation that getting back on the road, spending all your time doing the thing you love, is exactly what’s waiting on the horizon. No wonder we love singing along...

Hopeful expectation is in short supply for many of us these days as the Presidential campaign lurches unpleasantly along

amidst a summer of unprecedented violence here in the United States and around the world. In many respects getting “on the road again” is exactly what we don’t want to do. As a recent veteran of cross country travel I can attest that even when things go exactly as planned cross country travel is still stressful and exhausting! I admit I don’t enjoy flying, leaning more toward the “if God intended us to fly He would have given us wings” perspective on it. But, fly we did this past summer and I was able to do it because I was so very excited about what I knew would be waiting at the other end of the flight – yet another wonderful moment in the life I love.

On the road again. That could also be the subtitle of the story we read about the Apostle Paul this morning from the Book of Acts. The truth is that Paul’s willingness to be constantly “on the road again” is why we are sitting here this morning in our too warm sanctuary! Paul’s missionary trips around the known world at that time covered thousands of miles and a time span of almost 20 years. Paul, more than anyone else, is responsible for spreading the Good News of Jesus beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Palestine. This morning’s story from Acts gives us a glimpse of one of those road trips and why each of them mattered so much. It’s pretty much a snapshot of Paul’s version of what it meant to be “on the road again.” Just like Willie Nelson, it seems Paul really couldn’t wait to be “on the road again”

making music with his friends. Now, I don't know if Paul and Timothy would burst into song on occasion but, hey, it's possible! One thing for sure, Paul was committed to traveling in a time when that was not an easy thing to do.

Today's story actually marks the beginning of Paul's second major road trip, what biblical scholars call his missionary journeys. He'd made a shorter journey covering less distance once previously and now he was heading out again, intent on covering much more ground, taking as long as it would take. That's why this story begins with a sort of travelogue of all the places Paul, and his newly minted protégé Timothy, traveled as they looked for fertile ground for spreading the Word about Jesus. This description of their travels also tells us one critically important fact about how they decided where to go. Not once but twice, the text makes clear that the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus as it's also described, wouldn't let them go to certain places – Asia for one and Bithynia for another. How did this happen, we wonder? Visions? Whispers from unseen voices in the middle of the night? Or perhaps just travel plans that wouldn't fall into place. We don't know. But we do know Paul interpreted whatever it was as the guidance of God and acted accordingly, ending up in Macedonia because Paul had a vision that there was a man there asking them to come.

Ultimately they landed in the city of Philippi. As Paul usually did in his travels, he made his way to the river because he knew that would most likely be where the Jews of the community would gather for prayers. And, he was right. Only it wasn't a man whom he interacted with there. It was a woman named Lydia and Lydia's conversion marks a turning point for Paul's ministry in Philippi. Lydia was a remarkable woman because she was a property owner and a business owner at a time when men dominated the culture. This meant she was a woman of substance, someone well thought of and well respected. That she was part of the group gathering for prayers also means she was a person of faith. Perhaps this is why the text says that "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

Then, as a woman of considerable achievements had long ago learned to do, she didn't hesitate to act on the new information, the new learnings, the new understanding of God and Jesus that Paul brought into her newly opened heart. She asked to be baptized and had her whole household baptized too. This would mean not only any children and grandchildren living with her but also servants and siblings and anyone connected to her life each day. In doing so Lydia became a foundational member, a matriarch of the church in Philippi. She was in fact a founding mother of the Christian faith, and all because Paul was willing to be "on the road again" for Jesus.

The thing is this entire story, in fact the entire history of the growth of Christianity over the millennia, comes down to one phrase – “the Lord opened her heart to listen.” The Lord opened her heart – Lydia’s heart – to listen to what Paul had to tell her. But before that, the Lord had opened Paul’s heart to listen to what Jesus told him personally on that long ago Damascus road when he was converted from persecutor of Christ to missionary for Christ. And before that, the Lord had opened the hearts of the disciples to recognize Jesus for who he really was. And long before that, the Lord had opened the heart of a terrified young girl to listen to the words of an angel explaining God’s plans for her and the baby she would bring into life.

The Lord opened their hearts to listen! And once they listened with their open hearts, life changed forever for them and for all of us who seek to be changed by the good news of Jesus. Hearts open to hear the good news, to hear the teachings of Jesus, to hear with the eager anticipation of Lydia when Jesus explains that the most important thing any of us can do is to love God with all of who we are and all of what we have. And that unrestrained love for God is what makes it possible for us to do the impossible task of loving the other person as we much as we love ourselves. And as we listen, truly listen with our wide-open hearts we will realize that there are not qualifiers on who deserves to be loved by us as much as we love ourselves. We are to respond to everyone

with love and leave the judging to God. In the words of the prophet Micah we know that what God expects of us is not a lot of pious sounding words and empty promises. Instead what God wants from us, longs for from us is that we seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God every moment of every day.

Hearts opened to God, listening eagerly, waiting hopefully, trusting that God will show us the way forward in a society we sometimes don't even recognize as our own these days – that's what we need to be focused on in these hot summer days and the cool days of autumn soon to come followed by the icy winds of winter and the green and growing promises of spring. Every day we need to make the effort, do the often very difficult work, of keeping our hearts open to God listening eagerly for how God needs us to bring to life God's deepest desire for the world – mercy, justice and love that knows no bounds. Paul did this and he ended up back on the road again, over and over again, and we're here today because he did. So, here's my thought for you to ponder in your open heart, listening eagerly for God's still, small voice within – who might be waiting to listen eagerly as you tell them about your faith and why it matters in the midst of all the challenges we face each day? Who is out there just waiting for you to be “back on the road again” with a story about Jesus and your life you just can't wait to share? You just never know, but if you are willing to open you heart, God will show you the way. Amen.