

# “Come and Help Us”

Acts 16:9-15

May 1, 2016

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

“Come over and help us!” I think that most of us, being the nice kind of people we are, would probably respond to a plea or request like that received in a voice mail, email, or Facebook post by going over and helping that person. They probably need a ride, food, gas money, a flat tire fixed and so on. It’s relatively easy to write a check, swipe a debit card, or even take a little time and effort to fix a tire or drive someone to where they need to be.

St. Paul gets a similar request in our text for today. In a vision, he sees a man of Macedonia standing there, urging him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us!” For some reason which the text does not indicate, Paul concludes that the “help” the Macedonians need is to have the Gospel preached to them. When people ask you for help, do you ever conclude that what they need is the Gospel?

The need for the Gospel is THE greatest need that all people have. This is not to say that physical needs are not real or should not be met by Christians and the Christian Church. Sometimes we may spiritualize our love for neighbor so much that we may think that providing mere food, gasoline, transportation, and so on is somehow beneath us and that we should only be preaching the Word of God. However, Jesus says in His teaching on the Final Judgment in Matthew 25 that faith in Him is demonstrated by giving food and drink, being hospitable, providing clothes, and visiting sick people and those in prison.

Having said that though, the Gospel is quite literally a matter of life and death. For those seeking peace and meaning in life, the Gospel offers forgiveness for the sin against God which caused the unrest in the first place. It does this for the sake of Christ who took all sin to the cross in order to pay the price for peace by offering His life as sacrifice for sin. A forgiven life which is at peace with God is a life with purpose, direction, and hope.

For those who fear death and want answers to questions about death, the Gospel offers life and answers. It does this for the sake of Christ who conquered death, rose from the grave and left the grave alive to give life after death to all who believe. Only THAT life will not be more of this life with all of its disappointments, suffering, sadness, pain and death. THAT life will be life as God always intended for it to be – as described for us in the readings from Revelation during the Easter season – no tears, no death, no mourning, no crying, and no pain anymore.

We have that Gospel. It was preached, taught, and shared with us. By God’s grace through faith, we have received all of its gifts: forgiveness; reconciliation and new life; His comfort and presence in this life; and His promise and blessing for the greater life which is to come. We have been chosen and commissioned by God – all through baptism into the Priesthood of All Believers and some through a call into the Office of the Holy Ministry – to give people the greatest help they can get for the greatest problem they have, namely, the Gospel.

Yet, we so often fail at that. We fail at giving what we have been given. We fail at proclaiming the Gospel in whatever vocation God has placed us as pastor and people. The chief reason seems to be fear. We are afraid that we don’t know what to say. We are afraid that we don’t know how to say what we’re going to say. We are afraid of what people will say back to us about what we’ve said. And, most fearful of all, how are we going to get people to listen to what we say, much less believe it?

What are we to do? First of all, remember that our God is a forgiving God. While fear may explain some of the things we do, it is never a justification for what we do. We may be afraid of doing what God calls us to do and, therefore, not do it. But that doesn’t make it right for us not to do it. Failing to share the Gospel with someone whom God has specifically placed in our lives to hear the Gospel from us is a sin.

Yet it is a sin for which Christ died and for which Christ paid and for which Christ has earned forgiveness. This Good News is for you. The Gospel is not just a message for unbelievers to hear and convert them to faith in Christ. It is a message for Christians to hear and reassure them in their faith in Christ. Your sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. This includes your big sins and your little sins; your deliberate sins and your inadvertent sins; your sins of doing evil and your sins of failing to do good. All of your sins – even when you fail out of fear – are washed away in the blood of the Lamb Jesus Christ. So put those past sins of failing to share the Gospel out of your mind. God has put them out of His mind.

Secondly, look to the future to overcome fear by remembering who is really doing the work in this whole process. Some people seem to think that, in God’s plan for the salvation of humanity, Jesus has done

the saving part of His plan by His dying on the cross and rising to life from the grave. He has now ascended into heaven and left us to do the proclaiming and converting part of His plan. It's no wonder we get scared at such a huge responsibility.

But that's not the case as we see from our text for today. Paul receives a vision at night of a man from Macedonia urging him to come and help them in Macedonia. Here God, not Paul, is choosing a specific group of people to whom Paul should take the Good News. Prior to our text, it says that Paul had tried to go to Asia and tried to go to Bithynia, but, in each case, the Holy Spirit would not permit them to go. It was here – Macedonia – not the places Paul chose - where God wanted Paul and his group to go.

When they got to Philippi, a leading town in Macedonia, there was no parade to welcome them. There were no signs saying, "Preach here, Paul!" Paul couldn't even go to the local synagogue. It appears that there weren't enough Jewish males to even have a synagogue. So Paul left the town and went down to the riverside where he hoped to find people praying. And he found a group of women at prayer. It was to these people – not a large synagogue crowd – that God wanted Paul to preach.

And when Paul preached, who did the work? The text mentions a prominent wealthy business woman by the name of Lydia and says, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul." Soon, she and her family were baptized. She was so overjoyed at the blessings her new faith in Christ brought that she wanted to show her gratitude by begging Paul and his people to come and stay at her house. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

The Lord still works the same way among us today. It is true that all of humanity has tightly closed their hearts to the Lord because of their sin. But the Lord can and does open the hearts of even the most stubborn of sinners (Paul being a good example). He does it, not by magic or the oratory skills, sincerity, or will of any human, but by His Word. Paul spoke the Word of God. The Lord opened Lydia's heart. Lydia believed, was baptized, and began a life of thankful service.

He will do the same when you speak the Word of God. The Lord will open hearts. People will believe, be baptized, and live lives of faith. The Word of the Lord has power and will accomplish the tasks He gives it. As the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah, "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." (Is. 55:11)

Therefore, do not fear anything when it comes to responding to people's calls for help. Freely share the physical blessings from God which have been freely given to you: food, drink, clothing, hospitality, money, and so on. But always be aware of everyone's greatest needs: to be at peace with the true God through the forgiveness of sins and to know the way to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.

You may not receive special visions at night like Paul did, but look for people who are calling for the Gospel. God will put them in your life as He did for Paul. It may not be as direct as "Come and help us!" The cries might be more subtle: people who are burdened with care, worry, or guilt; people who are searching for meaning and purpose in life; people who are afraid of the future and afraid of death. Be attentive to these cries for help. They may not come from another continent like Paul. They may come from your classmates; your coworkers; your circle of friends; and even from within your own family.

Then speak the Word of God appropriate for the situation. (Of course, this means that you yourself will be instructed and familiar with the Word of God.) Speak it often. Speak it boldly. Speak it lovingly. Speak it directly. Don't worry about the presentation or the effectiveness or attractiveness of what you say. As His Word says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." (Proverbs 3:5) The Lord will open the hearts and minds of people to listen, believe, be baptized, and be saved. And He will use His Word and your speaking of it to do it.

When I was choosing the text for today's sermon, I marveled at how well it fit together with the Lutheran Women's Missionary League – Montana District Convention which is being hosted by our congregation. This text has a league – Paul's group of workers. This text is all about missionaries. The text has women – including Lydia, the first Christian convert in Europe. If I could just prove that Paul was Lutheran, we'd have it all. But this text is bigger than the LWML and bigger than Lutherans. It is for the whole Church. It is for you and me. Hear the people crying for help. Come with the help that God provides. Speak the Word of God to them. Trust the Lord to open their hearts to hear and believe. And He will. Amen.