

Sixth Sunday in Easter  
St. Michael's Church  
The Rev. Joshua Wong

First reading: Acts 16:9-15

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our God and our redeemer, Amen.*

Often I hear many well-intentioned parishioners who love our church ask me how we can increase our attendance. Yes, we have a great service, kind people, and a killer coffee hour, but all of us wish more people would discover us. Aren't all of our Episcopal churches working toward this goal? This is not only our hope—other ecumenical faith communities may want the same goal.

When I was a candidate for Priestly ordination, Bishop Taylor asked all the candidates the night before our ordination with a similar question. He asked, “Are you sure you want to serve what many think is a declining church?” He half jokingly tested us whether we would like to back out of our ordination plans. The deeper question might be, “Is there still hope for our denomination?” My answer to Bishop Taylor was: I don't think we are declining, but rather we are re-establishing who we are and reconfirming what we believe in; what makes sense, and what doesn't make sense as a community of believers. In other words, it's a time to be honest with ourselves and look for possible change. I used the analogy of a fire that has devastated a forest, yet underneath all the many layers of charred

shrubbery and debris lies a new bed of green life sprouting upwards. I think the Bishop loved my analogy so much, he passed me, and used it in his sermon the following day at our ordination.

In today's First reading in the Epistle of Acts, Luke the physician, who is understood to be the author, recalls Paul's vision to head towards Philippi to proclaim the gospel. This journey was not an easy one, as the crossing of the straight of Samothrace was treacherous. Paul and his team made a commitment to journey through Troas, in modern day Turkey, through the dangerous straits of Samothrace, a northern Island in Greece, then to their final destination, Philippi in modern day Greece to obey the voice of God. At Philippi, the Holy Spirit continued to lead Paul to a place of prayer. There, they encountered a woman in the Bible whom I have always found fascinating. Her name was Lydia, a merchant of purple linen. In Philippi, where she met Paul, Lydia encountered the deeper meaning of the Gospel, and it changed her life forever and her employees lives' as well.

What we know about Lydia was that she was a reputable businesswoman dealing in purple dye and possibly a widow who was a 'God-fearer' gentile attracted to Judaism. She was understood to be part of a large group of people who were sympathizers with Judaism but who had not yet taken the final step to conversion

to Judaism. Lydia was in charge of the household, as she was able to persuade the household to be baptized, and had the authority in her home to invite Paul and his companions to stay in her house. She was seemingly the first Gentile convert in what is now Europe, and the first believer to open her home as a worship center for European Christians. By opening her home to these missionaries, Lydia provided Paul and others with a base of operations in Philippi that facilitated their ministry in the region. She went on to help build up the church and used her generous gifts to affect great change by spreading the gospel. Her impact was so great that the church honors her with a feast day on May 21, which was last Wednesday.

Lydia's life began to change at the prayer meeting where Paul was led by a vision or the Holy Spirit. In Philippi, the Scripture says, "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

We truly do not know where the Holy Spirit leads us each day to effect change in our world. This is the mystery of faith. This is the mystery of the church. This is the mystery of the Holy Spirit. We offer what we have and allow the Holy Spirit to do the mysterious work of reconciliation and transformation. Our gospel reading says, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. But the Advocate, the Holy

Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

I pray that St. Michael's will always be a church that hears the calling of the Holy Spirit. I believe our evangelism ministry to the parents of our children, the outreach ministry we give to CASE, Veterans and Family Promise, and soon to college students at Otis is an example of following God's vision for us. Our new Audio Visual system, and our microphone live-streaming systems, enhance our worship for those in person and online. Our new website now reaches people all over the world. People we cannot imagine are searching and benefiting from it. And everyday, you minister in many ways by helping the sick, the hungry and the lonely. This is God's work, and like Paul, we participate in modern evangelism. And like Paul, Jesus still invites us to respond faithfully. Just like Paul, sometimes it may not be convenient and sometimes dangerous, and often doesn't make sense to our ROI (Return on investment), but we are called to follow the Spirit's leading. The work of the gospel still happens around us in 2025. You may know of other Lydia's in your life whose faith resulted in a domino effect that changed many lives. Daily, there are new converts that go on to become donors to help our diocese. There are new converts that changed their lives around to become leaders of change themselves. Take for example, the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, an

Episcopal priest whose interdenominational focus and the Oxford Group were significant influences for the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are LGBTQia people such as Bishop Gene Robinson, the first Episcopal LGBTQia Bishop who helped bring truth and justice to what our denomination needed to encounter. Or, you may be Lydia yourself, affecting impact in your sphere of influence. The Bible is full of life changing moments when the Holy Spirit broke through with positive change. Saul was struck by a brilliant light, fell to the ground and heard a voice from heaven identified as the voice of Jesus asking, “Why are you using violence against me?” Moses encountered God in the desert with the burning bush and altered his path in life, this experience ultimately led the Israelites out of slavery. Today, God is and can still convert people’s hard hearts if we pray for them and for ourselves.

Prayer is a vital part in our journey of faith if we want change to occur. That is why, beginning in June St. Michael’s will have a chance each month to a devoted time of prayer. Every third Sunday of the month, we will be offering meditation in Yeaton Hall at 9:15 am to 9:45 led by Bill Watkins, a long time parishioner of St. Michael’s. During that half hour, come and spend time quietly meditating on a passage or a thought. Just like Paul, we believe through meditation, we can see God’s will for our church and for our own lives. Through prayer, we will see doors open. God will show us where to go, what to do, and what to say.

Paul was led by a vision to go where God wanted him to go and God will do the same for us. So, if you want clarity in your life, if you want God to bless and guide St. Michael's, I invite you to come with an open heart.

During the week, I have conversations with parents when they drop off their children in the morning. I encourage them to come to our services. I frequently hear about how many of our children bring home what is taught about God to their family. One parent told me that her daughter made everyone at their Easter family gathering sing the Easter Song from church. This past Wednesday during our Chapel time, we sang, *He's Got The Whole World In His Hand*. After we sang all the verses, one little boy in the first row said to me, "Dogs and Cats." After a moment, I remembered that the last time we sang this song, which was many weeks ago, we added "He's got our dogs and cats in his hand." Then a girl said, "Mommies and Daddies." Which we also added last time. This says to me that our little ones retain their knowledge of what we teach them. Maybe one of them will become the new "Lydia" when they grow up? This is ministry in action. When we serve and follow God to bring the gospel to the people in need, it becomes life changing from the youngest to the oldest.

So, if we ever wonder how our church can be revitalized, we need to pray and listen to God's voice. When we do that, God will lead us to people in need and the

work that needs to be done. Remember the parable of the sower and the seeds? We are all in it together to fulfill the work of God. Contrary to popular belief, people today do care about their souls, and they do care about what is the meaning of life. In our world today, sometimes people need us simply as a companion in their lives. They simply need to know how Jesus is part of their lives. Then leave the rest to the Holy Spirit. During our conversations, God's mercy and compassion will speak for itself. But we need to ask ourselves, are we going to follow God in these revelations, are we asked to sow the seeds, water the seedlings or reap the harvest?

We are heading into an exciting time in the church. During our recent Clergy Conference, I discovered that many churches are seeing a resurgence of people attending services. The Holy Spirit has great powerful change planned for us even amongst a fire ridden forest. In a few weeks we will be entering into the season of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit is given to us, and the time where the church is born. May St. Michael's experience a new Pentecost, a re-commitment to follow the Holy Spirit, and a rebirth of an inclusive church, in which rules are re-evaluated and re-imagined and church is relevant. During this season, may we reflect on whether our faith is based on traditions, customs, or liturgies alone? Or is our faith a practice based on the gospel of Jesus' welcome and love to all neighbors in this world? Amen.