

NORTH MAIN SERMON MAY 18, 2025

Observed on the Third Sunday of May, this day calls The United Methodist Church to honor its heritage by committing itself to the continuing call of God known and spread by Charles and John Wesley, along with others the early Methodist movement reached and with whose denominations we are all joined as The United Methodist Church.

Let us start our sermon today with a prayer in memory of our forefathers.

Almighty God, you have raised up servants to proclaim the gift of redemption and a life of holiness. **For our spiritual forebears, we give thanks.** In their ministry, through their difficulties, and in spite of their weaknesses, you were their hope and their salvation. **You led them and their followers to create the heritage that is ours. With all your people throughout creation, give us a new vision, new love, new wisdom, and fresh understanding, that we may serve you more fully; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

So today is Heritage Sunday. The day provides an opportunity for reflection on heritage, celebration of where the Church has been, how it understands itself as it shapes us today, and the meaning of Christian conferencing. Heritage Sunday calls the Church to remember the past by committing itself to the continuing call of God. Many of the reflections on Heritage can be traced to visions.

Acts: 11- 1-18 The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance, I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

¹⁵ “As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with^[a] water, but you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” ¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

John 13:31-35

³¹ When he was gone, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him,^[a] God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. ³³ “My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

This story of visions makes us remember to ask God to Open our eyes and our hearts to catch a glimpse of this vision. Help us to place our trust in God, that we may faithfully serve him as the disciples did. God doesn’t tap us on the shoulder and then leave us alone to figure it out from there. God is a constant presence, guiding, advising, hinting, strengthening us for the journey into discipleship. But how do we hear that voice or see that vision? How do we know what God wants to say to us? How do we discern God’s voice in the midst of all the other voices in our lives?

But then look at the New Testament. The book with the most usage of the word “vision” is not Revelation but Acts. The Acts of the Apostles uses the word “vision” eleven times. So, what does that mean? Well, maybe nothing in a talkative world? That’s what this week addresses. It is interesting that in this story of the beginnings of the church there are frequent references to the idea of “vision”—specifically of hearing and seeing God’s vision as it is. We could just say that the first-century church was closer to the idea of vision, especially dreams as visions and communication from God than we are in this more scientific age. Maybe we’ve lost something by not being more in tune with visions. When have we ever heard God’s word spoken to us and we said ok God. I will stand in your way..Paul does not hesitate.. Paul gathers up his entourage and heads to Macedonia. Unlike some of us today, we don’t see a lot of waffling, a lot of questioning—should I go, was it real, it’s a risk. No, it says, “We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia.” Immediately. How often have you heard a word from the Lord and immediately changed your plans and your direction and headed off to a new destination. This is where we ask God once again to open our eyes and our hearts to catch a glimpse of this vision.

God spoke to Paul through a dream directing him to preach the gospel in Macedonia and he followed through without the assurance of having every need provided. Even on the journey, God was working to bring the gospel to people who would not have the chance to hear it without Paul's obedience. How often could we become someone's hope if we would only follow through obediently and take God's message without insisting on having all the details assured to us? And even with God’s assurance would we still go Immediately??

Paul's dream of the "Macedonia call" is one that depicts the emotion of the Christian mission. We must recognize that Paul is seeing the spiritual reality of the need in Macedonia. In the physical realm, Paul and his companions would not see needy people begging for what they had to offer. Spiritual realities are most times harder to grasp. People need God, but they may not know for what their spirits are crying. They may not give a fair hearing to believers who offer the cure for what ails them. God calls us to see the weakened and needy souls of humanity crying out for the gospel which we are called to share.

Paul's obedience to the call of sharing the gospel with those whom the Lord had directed him, resulted in meeting Lydia. She is described as a worshiper of God, yet there seems to be something missing in her.

The Apostle Paul first encountered Lydia at Philippi, in eastern Macedonia. She was a "worshiper of God," probably a proselyte, or convert to Judaism. Because ancient Philippi had no synagogue, the few Jews in that city gathered on the bank of the Krenides River for sabbath worship where they could use the water for ritual washings. Luke, the author of Acts, called Lydia a seller of purple goods. She was originally from the city of Thyatira, in the Roman province of Asia, across the Aegean Sea from Philippi. One of the trade guilds in Thyatira made expensive purple dye, probably from the roots of the madder plant. Since Lydia's husband is not mentioned but she was a householder, scholars have speculated she was a widow who brought her late husband's business to Philippi. Lydia ran a successful business selling a luxury product: purple cloth. This was a unique achievement for a woman during the male-dominated Roman empire. Lydia was intelligent, perceptive, and assertive to compete in business. Her faithful pursuit of God as a Jew caused the Holy Spirit to make her receptive to Paul's message of the gospel. She was generous and hospitable, opening her home to traveling ministers and missionaries. More importantly, though, she believed in Jesus Christ as Savior, was baptized and had her entire household baptized too. Lydia's story shows God works through people by opening their hearts to help them believe the good news. As Paul explained who Jesus was and why he had to die for the sin of the world, Lydia showed a humble, trusting spirit. Lydia also credited God with her earthly blessings and was quick to share them with Paul and his friends. Her example of stewardship shows we cannot pay God back for our salvation, but we do have an obligation to support the church and its missionary efforts. When she took Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke into her house, she created one of the first home churches in Europe.

The purpose of Paul's vision begins to materialize. If the call was for Lydia alone, she was worth the cost of Paul's obedience to it. God purposed to "open her heart." She may not have been the most impressive convert from our standpoint, but to a loving Father, she was more than worth disturbing the plan of his apostle.

After her baptism and those of her household, she offered provisions for the band of evangelists. The seeds of obedience on the part of Paul sprang forth into obedience in her life, and in return provided for the work of God. God provides when his servants responded positively to his call without the promise of provisions. Lydia in the Bible was one of thousands of minor characters mentioned in Scripture, but after 2,000 years, she is still remembered for her contribution to early Christianity. God "opened her heart" to pay close attention to Paul's preaching, a supernatural gift causing her conversion.

Before leaving Philippi, Paul visited Lydia once more. If she were well off, she may have given him money or supplies for his further journey. The early Christian church there, supported by Lydia, may have influenced thousands of travelers over the years.

Who knows how many men and women the Lord has ahead of us in our journey? They are awaiting our act of obedience. They may even be worshipers of God, but waiting for someone just like us to explain the gospel and lead them to a full faith in Christ. Perhaps we were at one time that person waiting for someone to come and share with us

Jesus tells his disciples that if they love him they will obey his teachings. In other words, he says, "If you really love me you'll do what I say." Paul saw the vision and immediately obeyed. Love serves as one motivation to obey God. We can obey without love. For instance, we can obey out of a sense of fear of what will happen if we don't obey or out of a sense of Christian duty instead of out of love. Or we can obey because we agree with the truth of the teaching. But Jesus calls his disciples to obey out of their love for him and for God.

Paul and Lydia are Easter people. In response to a vision, Paul travels to a new place to tell people about Jesus. In response to what she hears about Jesus, Lydia is baptized and offers her large, comfortable house as a home for Paul and a meeting place for the first Christians in her town. Though what Lydia did does not seem as exciting as what Paul did, they are equally important. We, like Paul and Lydia, are to respond to God's Easter message and do what we can to spread God's peace. Each day, if we pay attention to life around us, we will be surprised, maybe astonished, at things that happen to us.

One of the phrases that best characterizes contemporary culture is: “No one can tell me what to do!” We live in a culture that worships choice, freedom, and rights, and has little time for responsibility, discipline, and obedience. A generation is moving into adulthood that has little conception of obedience, other than a practical rejection of the whole idea. Thus, this passage rings terribly foreign to the contemporary ear. We are happy with the “love” part of the passage, but the notion that love is demonstrated through obedience to God—seems a radical concept indeed.

So we need to remember that Jesus didn’t ask us to love. He commanded us to love. So on Heritage Sunday we can be thankful for the obedience of the disciples like Paul who never hesitated but went immediately where God directed them. In fact, on this journey, Paul’s original intention had been to stay in Asia, but God had changed his plans. The Lord sent Paul a vision calling him westward across the Aegean Sea and into Macedonia. In the story of Lydia’s conversion, it marks the start of a new epoch in the Bible. Up to that point, the gospel had not gone further west than Asia Minor. So Lydia is marked as the first person to be saved in Europe. The saving of Lydia in the Bible is a great example of God’s providence and His care for believers. Lydia was a worshiper of God but had not yet heard the gospel. God rerouted Paul and friends and also ensured that Lydia would be in the right place at the right time to encounter Paul and hear the good news of Jesus. And, as Lydia heard the gospel, God opened her heart so that she received the life-giving message.