

9 May 2010; Easter 6C
Acts 16:9-15; Ps 67
Rev 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

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Sunset Boulevard is an unlikely place to look for God. By day, it teems with bikers, couriers, fashionable shoppers, and tourists gawking at all the wares, unmentionable in most towns, which are boldly flaunted in the shop windows. At night, it is given over to clubs and restaurants, music spilling into the streets as glassy-eyed revelers gyrate in the lights. When I lived in Los Angeles, however, Sunday morning was different. If you drove the Boulevard when the sun is new, you would see groups of people sitting at cafe tables out on the sidewalk, sipping coffee and nibbling croissants, and talking about the Bible. The Bibles were open on the tables; the conversation was animated, with pauses for thought. Almost all the participants were men. They came there on Sundays because they were gay, and they were not sure what would happen if they tried to walk into a church. They didn't know whether they would be welcome, or whether they would be turned away. I don't know whether they gather there any more, but, even years later, the scene haunts me: all those people trying to love Jesus, but afraid of other Christians.

There is a similar, discordant moment in today's passage from Acts. Paul and Silas (and possibly Luke) arrive in a new town, Philippi, a Roman colony. And on the Sabbath day, they desire to worship, and so they go, not to synagogue, but outside the city walls, to a place by a river. There they indeed find people at prayer, and they join them.

But what were those people doing outside the city walls? Why were they not in a house of worship, participating in the regular rounds of communal prayer? Did they just like to pray in the beauty of nature? Was there a repression of some sort in progress, so that the Jews could not pray openly? Was the community split, so that some people were welcome and others were not? Had the women been made to feel ashamed or afraid, unwelcome? The Scripture does not say, but we do know the basic themes of Paul's preaching, words which would appeal strongly to the hearts of those who had been pushed away: *If you feel you have fallen short, so has everyone else. No-one is perfect in the eyes of God. But take heart; Christ came to save sinners. By his death he destroyed alienation and death; by his rising he makes the whole creation new. Believe in him and be baptized in his name, and you, too, will be raised to eternal life.*

And Lydia believed! Whatever led her to that place on that morning, the Lord opened her heart to receive the words she heard, and she and her entire household were baptized. The news of Christ came as a salve to whatever wounds her heart carried; her griefs, struggles, and burdens were taken up into the living heart of God, and became lighter for being shared. And this foreign-born woman, from Thyatira in Turkey, opened the doors of her house to give the apostles a home.

The thing is, there are many Lydias out there, pouring out their hearts in prayer outside the church walls. If you Google "why I don't go to church anymore," you find their stories. There is the man whose daughter was not allowed to be in the church photo directory because she was a single mother, like Mary. There are others who were made to feel unwelcome because of what they looked like, what they wore, what they earned, or how they lived. There are even a significant number of posts from people who are frustrated at being told that the church is an institution we serve or a building in which we pray, rather than the people of whom we already are. (They are, of course, correct! The church *is* people, not buildings!) In each of these postings, there is a strong current of anger and of pain. One man writes, "Why do we have such big congregations that grow by the thousands when people like me and my sister in law are excluded? ... What about the fractured? What about the outcasts and excluded? Society already frowns on them... so why exclude them?"

The voices which represent the Christian faith in our mainstream media are all too often voices of judgment and condemnation. These voices claim to know exactly who God is and what God wants from us. And yet, the stern and unforgiving Father they name seems to have little to do

with the Jesus who picked up the thronging children and held them to his cheeks and blessed them, the Jesus who wept when his friend seemed to have died. The unyielding judge they depict could not be more different from the man who refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery, but who, instead, gave her accusers time and space to remember that they, too, were not without sin. Christ came into the world, not to condemn us, but to *save* sinners. Like a tender mother or a gentle father, Christ receives no joy in watching his children suffer. He came to call us back to our best selves, and that is precisely the message which is not being heard: the message about redemption. Against that cacophony of condemnation, we are called to be a healing voice, a loving voice, speaking the word of grace to all the broken-winged children of God.

Even within the progressive and inclusive churches, we can fail to make that voice heard to anyone but ourselves. We can wait for people to come to us, rather than going to them where they are. We can be so wrapped up in our own needs and responsibilities that we do not even see the needs of others. Even in a diverse congregation like this one, we often find it easier to see the face of God in people who share our values, our neighborhood, our lifestyle. We can sit near one another rather than engaging with one another; we can choose proximity rather than relationship.

There's a danger in imperfect Christians— and, Christ reminds us, we are all imperfect Christians! We can be so eager to grasp at the places in which we have seen God that we ignore or disparage the places where others encounter her. We can be so glad to have escaped from bondage to our sins and compulsions that we sound judgmental to others who are struggling to achieve the freedom which cost us so much. We can make people feel like immigrants in Arizona— constantly afraid that they will not have the right papers to “prove” that they belong. Without knowing it, we can force others to seek God outside the gate, beyond the city walls.

There's a funny thing about the space outside the city walls, though: that's where Christ died and rose again to new life. Not amid the true believers, whose minds were so fixed on their own idea of God that they could not recognize Christ sitting at their table, but among the “out group,” the ones who were not loved by their neighbors, the ones who did not fit in. The ones who had never heard of God, the ones with a god-shaped hole in their hearts, waiting and breathing to be filled. The ancient fathers used to say, “Never look down on anyone. You do not know whether the spirit of God prefers to dwell in you or in them.”¹

If we are to try to live like Jesus, then we must go where Jesus went: to the people who have never heard of him, to the people who have been rejected, to the people who are hoping against hope that the good news might be for them. To those people, the ones Zechariah calls “prisoners of hope,” we must speak the words of Christ: “I will not leave you orphaned.” (Zech 9:12; John 14:18) *I will not leave you orphaned.* He will not leave them alone, powerless, frightened, crying out in the dark, fighting for their daily bread; instead he will send them a comforter, the Holy Spirit, living in our hearts so that it may be kindled in theirs. For we, my friends, are the Temple of the indwelling spirit of God, and it is that light, shining forth in our lives, which will lead the orphan home.

When the angel of the Lord took John to the holy city, the heavenly Jerusalem, John saw the water of life running through the city. And on its shore was the tree of life “with its twelve kinds of fruit...and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.” (Rev 22:2) That tree, the cross-shaped tree whose fruit was the body of Christ given for us, heals the nations one soul at a time: yours, and mine, and each person to whom we bring the grace and healing of Christ. This is the work which prepares us to see God face to face: learning to see God now, in this world. For the heavenly Jerusalem “com[es] down out of heaven”: eternity is born not among the clouds, but here, on this soil, in the dark earth under our feet, and in the hidden riches of our souls.

¹ Sayings of the Egyptian Fathers.

Vigen Gurioan writes of this earth, “In the pearly petals of the star of Bethlehem, the mockingbird’s evening song, the pomegranate’s sanguine seed, the lilac’s perfume scent, and the eggplant’s silky skin, Paradise shows itself to holy senses. Through sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch, God meets us in the Garden. For he never left it, not even after Adam’s banishment. And he has invited us back in. ‘I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise’ (Luke 23:43).”²

That invitation points us toward the mystery of our own salvation. For we ourselves, who are in the church, are still outside the walls of the City. In this life, we are aliens and exiles, strangers wandering far from our true home. We are simultaneously the broken and the healed, the people who seek God and the people God has redeemed. And so we cannot pass judgment on anyone, for we share the same broken and alien ground. At times, we live within the City; at times, we stray far from its walls; at times we stray far even from our own selves.

At those times, remember: Within the walls you dwell with Christ, and outside the walls he has come to seek you. You cannot fall out of God’s hand. But while you are out there, share a kind word with the people who are afraid to come in. Speak the kind word of Christ to those whose hearts are broken for wanting God’s infinite love. And then, when you are gathered together to your self at last, those other people to whom you have given yourself will each come running, holding the fragments of your heart in their hands. On that day, their love will make you whole, as you have made them holy.

² *The Fragrance of God*, p. 48-9.