

The First Mennonite Church

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My mother-in-law is one of those people who is a natural at welcoming. From the first time she met me, I could tell that she wanted me to feel at home. There's always room to add more people to the family supper on Sunday night. She's very conscientious in preparing food that caters to the company's preferences. She listens very carefully, and wants to anticipate folk's needs when they are at her home. In many ways, she embodies the servant attitude of being a host, all in the spirit of wanting to make you feel welcome when you are in her home. Now, lest you feel I've painted my mother-in-law with too narrow a brush, there is so much else that makes her a wonderful mother-in-law, but for the purposes of this morning, I want to highlight this as one of her great gifts, which she so completely embodies.

I've been giving some thought this last while to what it means for us to be a welcoming church. And I'll upfront say that when I'm talking about being welcoming this morning, I'm talking about our call to welcome the stranger into our congregation, a call to broad hospitality. I've been thinking of this ever since I heard a broadcast of "Under the Influence" with Terry O'Riley, where he discussed the little things that make one feel welcome, like they belong somewhere.

It can be as simple as making sure a parking spot is available for guests and visitors, and good signage so that people who aren't familiar with the space know where to go when they need to get somewhere. It means adjusting our language and spelling out what MCC, CMU, AMBS, MCEC, and MC Canada mean, to name a few organizations from our alphabet soup. And it means being careful and aware in our interactions so that folk don't feel like they're crashing a private party on Sunday mornings. I think we could all agree that it's important for us to practice being welcoming and hospitable. If for no other reason than for people to find the wonderful community that we've found here.

Our scripture readings today illustrate for us how important it is to practice welcoming the stranger well. Generally speaking, the back half of the book of Acts shifts to placing the Apostle Paul centre stage. It is written almost as a travelogue; a journal of the places he's been, how he gets there, who he meets along the way, what happens in the places he stops; hint, he's often in trouble. It's a fascinating read. And, in our reading from Acts, we get this tiny, short anecdote this morning about a purple fabric dealer. But this short anecdote sets the stage for a larger work.

Some backstory, Paul has set out on a journey to Macedonia. This is spurred on by a vision that Paul has had; he has seen a man from Macedonia who was pleading with him to come over to Macedonia and to help them. Neither Paul nor we know what kind of help is needed, and it doesn't seem to matter because Paul is convinced this is a vision from God, and so he sets things in motion for their journey.

The journey to Macedonia isn't straightforward. It's a trip that takes Paul and Silas from one major hub to another major hub of the ancient world, and along the way, Paul and Silas have a stopover in Philippi. Founded as a Roman colony, Philippi was home to retired veterans, merchants, and citizens who lived under the banner of the empire. The city developed a distinct Latin-speaking culture with Roman-style administration and infrastructure—forums, temples, and baths—that blended with existing Hellenistic elements. It was here, in this stronghold of Roman power, that the Gospel would find its first foothold in Europe.

Their stopover is a few days long and is long enough to span a Sabbath. True to their faith, Paul and Silas seek out a place of prayer. Hearing that such a gathering place exists outside the city gates, they follow the path to the riverside. There, they sit and visit among the women who have gathered to worship and pray.

Let's stop for a moment here. This fact alone, that Paul and Silas are gathering with a group of women to pray outside the city gates, is worthy of some damaging gossip. Let's face it, there have been rumours started for much less. And here we soon learn that Paul and Silas are meeting with a small, house church of women. As they visited and Paul spoke, one of the women, Lydia, was captivated by what Paul was saying. This is our first introduction to Lydia.

As we soon discover, Lydia was a devout worshiper of God, a dealer in purple cloth, and the head of a significant household that likely included servants and other workers. Her trade placed her in privileged circles; she did not deal in just any fabric, but in purple—a hue so difficult to obtain that it was reserved for royalty. In the passion narrative, this same colour was draped over Christ in mockery, turning His kingship into a farce. Yet, because true purple was so prestigious and expensive, it remained a symbol of wealth accessible only to the upper class. Thus, we can confidently surmise that Lydia moved comfortably within those elite social strata.

As Paul spoke, Lydia listened closely, and Scripture tells us that 'the Lord opened her heart' to respond eagerly to his message. Yet, what truly captures my attention is her immediate, radical hospitality toward these strangers. Not knowing Paul or Silas from anyone else, save that they're servants of God, followers of Jesus, Lydia welcomes them into her home and invites them to stay. The verb here is more than an invitation. The Greek is often translated as prevail or persuade. However, I prefer the closer translation of urge, or as other scripture has translated, urged us until we gave in, or to say it another way, "she would not take no for an answer". This is similar to how the disciples on the Road to Emmaus urged the stranger to break bread with them as the sun set.

To me, this moment reveals the true spirit of Lydia as her character and personality shine through most brightly here. One could speculate on her motives: perhaps it was a calculated business maneuver, a political statement, or a way to garner acclaim. I cannot know for certain. But I prefer to believe this hospitality was simply intrinsic to who she was. It suggests a woman whose nature was to welcome strangers, to be open to new connections, and to persistently urge others into her circle until they accepted her invitation.

Lydia's hospitality sets the stage for God's work to unfold. We learn later that this very act became the catalyst for forming one of the first house churches in Europe. It is this community that Paul addresses in his later letter to the Philippians—a church that would go on to sustain him in prison once again. Ultimately, I am convinced that a defining trait of Lydia's character was her nature as a welcoming soul.

In the case of Lydia, a warm welcome and a gracious invitation to strangers, Paul and Silas, marked the beginning of an entire church plant. It's this example from Lydia that I think still speaks to the church today. I believe we are called to embody Lydia's example—not as a historical footnote, but as a living model for how we will build a church culture where hospitality becomes a part of our shared identity.

Looking at our own congregation: what might it mean for us to practice Lydia's kind of welcoming spirit today?

Consider for a moment how guests might experience our weekly gatherings—do they feel like they've entered a private party where everyone already knows each other, or do they feel genuinely welcomed as strangers becoming part of the family? I recognize these are two distinct poles, but it is worth pondering. What is it that we're doing to help or hinder folk as they visit and join us for worship? I named a few at the beginning. But there's always more that we can do. We believe that discipleship happens most deeply through relationships—we grow in faith by helping one another grow, drawing people closer to God through the authentic example we set. What example are we setting?

I think a key part of welcoming is being ourselves and not putting on airs. We can keep a façade up for only so long, trying to be something we're not, but eventually, cracks will form, inconsistencies will show, and whether we want it or not, our true selves will show. A welcoming person is a person who is comfortable with who they are, isn't that what Jesus teaches? The truth sets you free.

So I wonder, what might it look like for our congregation to be truthful with ourselves? Who are we really? What's the truth of ourselves that sets us free to be the church God is calling us to be? So who are you? For me, I don't see a checklist of what you should or could be doing. I don't see a list of beliefs or statements; instead, I see who you are.

You are a congregation that loves to laugh, you enjoy your fellowship, but if a job needs to be done, you rise to the challenge. You love singing and eating together. You support those who are a part of you, and even some who aren't. You give generously, and you celebrate well, both in life and in death. You show great care and concern for one another, demonstrating your love for one another in a variety of ways. You champion causes for justice. You are honest and gentle. You are a congregation who are a little anxious, but really, who isn't these days, and you are also a congregation with a stream of hope running throughout. You hold a lot of history, 225 years this year if my math is correct, and you are curious, creative, and you are open to trying new things out. These are some of the reasons why I've fallen in love with you.

Being yourself is what drew me to you. Just as you welcomed me, a stranger, you have proven that your doors remain open and are ready to do it again.

Lydia gives us an example of a tenacious welcoming spirit, one that lays the foundation for God to be at work. It is a welcome that is rooted in who she is, and sharing herself with those who come to visit. May we continue to foster the welcoming spirit of Lydia. One that's not ashamed of who we are, rather one that shares joyously, comfortably welcomes, fellowships caringly, and lays the groundwork for the Spirit of God to be at work, helping each one of us grow closer to God.

Amen