

**NEW POWER LOOSE IN THE WORLD: OPENING PATHS TO MISSION
ACTS 16:9-15
MAY 13, 2007—MOTHER’S DAY, BAPTISM
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This past week I was in New York for meetings at Auburn Seminary on whose board I serve. Each visit I try to get to at least one museum. This time it was the American Folk Art Museum on 53rd St. The work of Martin Ramirez was on exhibit.

Ramirez lived in the first half of the 20th century; migrated from Mexico to find work to support his family. In his early twenties he was rounded up by police, diagnosed as mentally ill and institutionalized for the rest of his life in a state hospital in California.

In the early fifties a UC professor of psychology discovered Ramirez’s artistic work: hundreds of drawings in pencil and crayon on any paper he could scavenge. The result is a stunning body of art.

What are fascinating are his themes, one of which is trains and tunnels. There are dozens of somewhat abstract drawings, meticulously different, of trains, landscapes, and tunnels. Ramirez’s balance, shading, color and intricate design is the work of a self-taught master.

But at some point in the exhibit you realize the trains go nowhere. In and out of tunnels. Up and down long, straight, sometimes curving tracks. Endlessly.

One drawing portrays a man sitting at a table and above him, as if in a window another train moving along a track. Could this be Ramirez deeply longing to get on that train, yet unable to leave his institutionalized life?

I wonder if the drawings of Martin Ramirez are a metaphor for the modern world.

On the one hand we have built a society which gives unprecedented freedom to its citizens. On the other hand we are surrounded by burglar alarms, medicine cabinets, and our fears.

From war to climate crisis to terrorist threat there is enough worry to fill an ocean but no apparent or easy way out.

We are given maximum space to aggressively pursue what we want—as long as we do not bump into anyone else while they are getting theirs.

What we call culture is a vast super market of desire and citizens self-interested consumers. We have freedom of choice, but what do we do with our freedom? We are free but terribly lonely and driven. The 9 to 5 job, monthly mortgage payments, over-programmed children, dog-eat-dog contests for everything from good grades to the right schools. Our perceptions of each other across differences of age, gender, race, religion, and socio-economic barriers are complicated by prejudice and bias.

Perhaps we are not as free as we think. There is freedom and there is freedom. One of our problems, someone said, is that we may not even know what true freedom is. I’d like to consider today’s story from Acts as a story of new found freedom. Where does authentic freedom come from, where does it lead?

Just as Martin Ramirez's drawings may be an illustration of the sense of entrapment of our age, so the conversion of Lydia in today's reading illustrates passage into a new world where true freedom is found.

Lydia's conversion is interesting not only because she was the first European to embrace the faith and her conversion is the result, says Acts, of the Holy Spirit not Paul; it is interesting because she is a woman and she is rich.

In the ancient world the collaboration of males with females on matters outside the home was relatively unknown except in the Christian community. Women could be members of the movement without the permission of their husbands. One of the distinguishing features of the early church was the important role women played as leaders.

The other point of interest is that Lydia is rich. She trades in high end goods. Money is a two edged sword. The gospel says wealth carries special challenges, even dangers.

Luke, the author of today's story, says "it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Yet, Luke does not opt for a Marxist "class struggle" or "preferential option for the poor" as do some liberation theologies.

Rather we are given some alternatives: Jesus redeems Zacchaeus who gives over half his possessions to the poor. The Good Samaritan illustrates what is accomplished through the right use of money. In the early church wealthier members gave for those who had less. Reed Stevens calls this the idea of the "long pew" long enough for all of us regardless of wealth.

How do we find the new land of freedom? Remember the Spirit that led Paul to Lydia. When he wanted to go to Asia Minor and Bythania, the Spirit closed the door—we don't know the details, just that that way was closed. Maybe they missed the ship, who knows?

Once in Macedonia, the southern tip of Europe—future home of great Cathedrals, a global church and brave Reformers, Paul preaches and Lydia, a Jew is among the crowd. Her heart is warmed—a sign of God's Spirit. Paul baptizes her and her household then she invites him to come to her house and supports his efforts in a new land. Were it not for her conversion we might not be here today.

And here is the discovery of true freedom. Barriers which divided male and female or Jew from gentile Jewish convert, within synagogues, do not hold up in the ancient church. Lydia is free to be hospitable and Paul is free to welcome her as a sister in Christ.

Another remarkable freedom in this story is the mixing of classes. In the ancient world, not unlike today there was little mixing of classes. You remained in the social class to which you were born. The military was the only way out or up.

But among these Christians there is an easy give and take and warmth of hospitality between members of different social classes. This point would not have been missed by Luke's readers.

There is freedom and there is freedom. Perhaps sometimes we forget what real freedom is. The story from Acts gives us a good glimpse into lives that were made free from worldly barriers by the Gospel.^[1]

How about true freedom in our time? Back in New York last Monday in an elegant Park Ave. apartment I heard an amazing presentation by Auburn's "Face to Face, Faith to Faith" program. "Face to Face" brings teenagers from Northern Ireland, South Africa and Palestine and Israel each summer to a church camp on the Hudson River.

They come to the camp regarding their fellow country men and women as the enemy. They leave with what they thought was impossible—new friends across the barriers of religion and race; violence and bloodshed.

Two teenagers spoke to us—a Palestinian Muslim and an Orthodox Jew from Jerusalem. Each of them lost family members to the violence but they came away from last summer's experience with mutual understanding, respect and friendship. They were freed from old hatreds.

I could tell real change occurred for these young men when I heard Elad, the Jewish teenager, say "I am opposed to any bombing because I am afraid my friend Ayoub and his Muslim friends, whom I have met, will be hurt."

It is hard to translate the significance of an Orthodox Jew opposing the use of armed force against Islamic neighbors. But as I looked around this gathering with seventy of New York's movers and shakers—mostly Jewish, sitting on the floor and standing against the expensive artwork on the walls many eyes were filled with tears.

I think we all had the very real sense that these two young men and their "Face to Face" peers were opening the door to peace in the Middle East.

The Americans in that room enjoy more freedoms than most of the rest of the world but we were reminded of our deep longing like Martin Ramirez to be really free. Free of the things that have enslaved humans from the beginning of time: hatred, fear, and violence.

We're not talking about freedom to acquire abundance in material things today but freedom to experience abundance in human community—as diverse and multifaceted as it is. Deep and meaningful relationships across the barriers that have divided humans in every age.

The message today is that the Holy Spirit, let loose in the world after the Resurrection, is at work breaking down those barriers. New paths to peace and justice and hope are opening all the time, thanks to the Spirit.

Through Lydia, God's Spirit opened the door to a new field of mission in Europe. Through those teenage high schoolers, God is opening the door to peace in Palestine and Israel. What about you and me?

I wonder if God's Spirit isn't working through this congregation to open new mission that will break down the walls that imprison our community. Building bridges with jobs and education and housing on the West Side. Building bridges with religious and racial understanding through Mitzvah Day and our Racial Justice work. Opening the doors of this church to gay and lesbian children of God.

Mitzvah Day is next week. I hope the Spirit has nudged you to take part. Our Racial Justice Committee is planning some big new event—an encore to God’s Trombones that will let us see what happens when “all of us get together” as Ken Carter likes to say.

Sometimes we get trapped in ourselves—even here in the freest nation on earth. There is freedom and there is freedom.

Thank God this Mother’s Day for Lydia and the leadership of women. Those two precious children we baptized are the inheritors of Lydia’s openness to God’s Spirit and her inclination to follow where she was led.

Many years ago a wise Deacon said to me when he was about to engage in a controversial project in a church I served in seminary, “real freedom comes when we get out of our own skins and do something for someone else.”

It is disheartening to hear the leader of the largest church on the planet now visiting South America speak suspiciously of the Pentecostal Church and give the back of his hand to women. But even Popes cannot stand in the way of the Holy Spirit.

The true measure of a Christian church is not how many continents it occupies or how many people are on the rolls of a congregation but how many are sent out, like those first apostles, to break down the barriers that divide the human family. Amen.

^[i] William Willimon, Acts (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988) 100ff. The exegesis of today’s reading comes from Willimon’s commentary.