

SIX-FOLD TEST FOR MULTIETHNIC MINISTRY

SERMON SERIES: POPULATION | PARTICIPATION | POWER | **PACE-SETTING** | PURPOSEFUL NARRATIVE | PRACTICING SOLIDARITY

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Pace-setting

#4. With additional perspectives, burdens, and gifts in our midst, what new ministry opportunities is the Covenant now better positioned to strengthen and initiate?

Acts 16:4-40, NIV

PAUL'S VISION OF THE MAN OF MACEDONIA

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

LYDIA'S CONVERSION IN PHILIPPI

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple

cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

PAUL AND SILAS IN PRISON

Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her.

When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are



all here!”

The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: “Release those men.” The jailer told Paul, “The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace.”

But Paul said to the officers: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out.”

The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

Hello, my name is Cindy Wu. I attend Mosaic Community Covenant Church in Sugar Land, a suburb of Houston, Texas. Vocationally I am a local missions mobilizer, and I currently work as the program manager for a nonprofit called Houston Welcomes Refugees.

Today I have been tasked with preaching on pacesetting. As a triathlete, I actually spend some time thinking about pacesetting. Don’t be too impressed—I only do two to three races per year (and sprint races at that). Nevertheless, I do train year-round, and as any triathlete knows, pacesetting is an important aspect of competing, and, at my age, avoiding injury or burnout.

I’ll come back to triathlons later. For now, let’s talk about pacesetting in ministry. Pacesetting describes our aspirations that as we move forward together to build a

mosaic kingdom of God, we do so incorporating all the perspectives and gifts—as well as burdens—in our midst. Pacesetting in a ministry context asks the question, What new opportunities is the Covenant (or your church) now better positioned to strengthen and initiate? Pacesetting is an important dynamic of multiethnic ministry, and my hope today is to illuminate one major principle that I think will help us be faithful as we pursue a mosaic kingdom.

Let us open in prayer: Heavenly Father, give us the grace to hear whatever you want us to learn today. Holy Spirit, open our hearts to your leading. In Jesus’s name, amen.

The book of Acts traces the expansion of the gospel from Jerusalem to spreading throughout the Roman Empire. Remember when Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “And you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth”? Well, that is exactly what happens in the book of Acts. The first half of Acts focuses on the development of the nascent church; the second half, beginning in Acts 13, turns its focus outward to the missionary enterprise spearheaded by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul. In chapter 16 we find Paul and Silas traveling around delivering the Jerusalem Council’s decision regarding Gentile inclusion. We are introduced to Paul’s disciple and new travel mate, Timothy. The writer of Acts, Luke, soon joins them. Together they are about to embark on an exciting missionary journey.

This is a long passage, so I will zoom in on one major principle regarding pacesetting, followed by three subpoints.

From this passage, I see that **pacesetting is spiritually discerned**. At the beginning of Acts 16, the Holy Spirit plays a prominent and active role. Paul, Silas, and Timothy went all throughout the region east of Asia having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia, which is where they wanted to go. And when they tried to go to Bithynia the Spirit once again said, “Nope.” So, they ended up going in another direction to Troas. This was not Paul’s plan, but he was on track to follow God’s pacing because he spiritually discerned God’s leading.

Pacesetting is spiritually discerned. There are three subpoints of this principle and here’s the first: **Sometimes when we’re seeking to discern God’s pacing, you get a NO, a SLOW or a GO**. At this point in Paul’s career, he was moving at a pretty fast clip. Paul comes across



as a no-nonsense kind of guy who was laser focused on mission. He was traveling all over the region, churches were being strengthened, numbers were increasing daily, and when he finally got the green light to go to Macedonia, we see in Acts 16 that Paul set out immediately.

Paul knew when to go, only because he discerned the Lord's pacesetting: The Lord's "no"—"no preaching in Asia!"; the Lord's "slow"—"Go the long way to Troas first!"; and the Lord's "go"—"Okay, you can come over to Macedonia now!" Paul knew the difference.

Which leads me back to triathlons. Many people compare life or ministry to a marathon, but I tend to think of it as a triathlon. A triathlon is an endurance race consisting of three legs: swimming, biking, and running. Most triathletes are better at one or two of the legs. For me the swim is my "slow," biking is my "let's go," and the run is my "oh no" because by then I'm pooped! I compare ministry or life to a triathlon because we go through different seasons or stages. We adapt and transition to the next thing. This feels more like a triathlon to me.

Here are a few tips about pacesetting that I've learned through picking up triathlon as a midlife hobby.

I need to start the race at my own pace, and not compare myself to the lean machine standing next to me. In fact, when I compare and try to keep pace with others above my own abilities, I'll surely run out of gas. I can't go all-out in the swim, because I've got two more legs to do. I need to conserve my quads on the bike, because I've got the run at the end.

For my first triathlon I forced myself to run the entire last leg and it was so hard. After hopping off my bike, my legs felt like Jello, and I just didn't enjoy the run, even though that was the sport I'm most used to. So I started to pay attention to some of the people around me who looked like they were somewhat enjoying this. What I noticed is that some of them walked part of the run. I've always been too proud to walk in any race (and I don't even run distances long enough to brag about), but the next race I followed their example and did a walk/run on the last leg.

In doing so, I discovered the trick that would help me enjoy the run portion and not cut into my time much at all. Now I walk/run every time. This method not only incorporates short intervals of rest, it's so effective that I even won first place in my age division once! (Okay, there were only three women in my division, but still!) In life and ministry, we can't just go, go, go. We also need to

have a rhythm of slow too: do self-care, take Sabbath, and sleep. And sometimes we get a no—a pause to stop and perhaps redirect. Being in tune with the Spirit and with our own bodies will help us know the difference.

The second subpoint of spiritual discernment is, learn holy indifference.

St. Ignatius of Loyola teaches about learning to become indifferent to our plans and agendas. Indifference does not mean not caring. Holy indifference is reaching a place that gives us the ability to say along with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will but yours be done, O Lord." It is a detachment from one's own plans and the ability to say, "Whatever happens, it is well with my soul." Holy indifference says, "If God is saying go, I go. If God is saying no, I will cooperate with God."

Remember that in verse 6 Paul wanted to preach in yet unreached provinces like Asia, but he was blocked. That block leads him to Troas, where Paul receives a vision that would open to his team a new mission field—into Europe. Paul went in the Lord's timing, and that allowed him to experience the miracle of the earthquake, which was also key to the mission.

This reminds me of my husband's and my experience in East Asia two decades ago. We lived there for three years, serving with a group of friends from college. While we were in college together, we sensed God forming us into a mission team. Like Paul, we wanted to preach among yet unreached people in Asia. Some of us got the "go" and ended up in Asia, but some of us were blocked by God's clear "no" and stayed in the States. My husband I went first, and rather than all eight of us landing at the same time, some got a "slow" and arrived just as we were preparing to depart from the field. We were a close-knit team of strong personalities, diverse gifts, and different—if not sometimes divergent—perspectives.

My time in East Asia probably taught me more than any other season in my life about the power of seeking spiritual discernment, both individually and collectively. Our mission team leader—coincidentally named Paul!—and his wife used to say again and again, "God, if you want to do this, then show us how; make a way. Not our will, but yours be done." Our team had a plan of action when we went to Asia, but God redirected our steps, from one business to education to health care and counseling, from one city to another, from working with only house churches to other structures. Our leaders modeled holy indifference to us, not by elevating their



own plans or egos, but through listening to God and others and holding our own plans and dreams lightly.

The third element of spiritual discernment as it relates to pacesetting is, pay attention.

Here's a quote from Wendy W. Wright in *A Guide to Prayer for Spiritual Discernment* (86):

“Spiritual discernment asks us to pay attention. We need to attend to both what goes on around us and within us. Ideally, this attentiveness goes on much of the time, a sort of low level, constant spiritual sifting of the data of our experience. But there are times when discernment becomes much more focused, when a crossroad is reached or a choice called for. At times like these the cumulative wisdom of tradition tells us to pay attention on many levels: to consult Scripture, to seek the advice of trusted advisors, to heed the collective sense of the faithful, to read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking, to pray, to attend to the prick of conscience and to the yearnings and dreamings of our hearts, to watch, to wait, to listen.”

Spiritual discernment is multi-dimensional in its input. What is God doing? Who is God bringing across your path and into your community? Who can I learn from? What doors is God opening and shutting? What are the new perspectives, gifts, and burdens in your midst? And what opportunities do they open for you?

Let's look at the cast of characters from our passage in Acts:

- Young Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father, fellow missionary and church leader
- Lydia, an immigrant, a wealthy businesswoman who helps establish the church at Philippi
- A slave girl of the lowest caste of society who was doubly entrapped both by the order of the world and by an otherworldly spirit whose behavior resulted in Paul and Silas's imprisonment. At first glance this appears to be a hindrance to the mission, but God had a plan they could not yet see.
- The Roman jailer who witnessed the miracle of the earthquake and jailbreak, whose life was spared. He believed and was baptized, he and his household. The release of Paul and Silas and discovery of their Roman citizenship even earned them an apology from a city official.

Each of these characters contributed, willingly or unwittingly, to the mission of God and the expansion of

the church into previously unreached areas. What might Paul have missed out on if he had not had the ears to hear and the spirit to discern the voice of God? What if he had rejected God's "slow" in the invitation of Lydia to Paul and his mates to hang around Philippi a few more days? What if Paul had held tightly to his opinions, strategy, experience, and plans—and he had very good plans—rather than wait for God's "go"? Paul and his friends are a good example of how to pay attention to what God is doing, even if—especially if—it differs from our personal vision, in order to allow the Spirit to guide our steps through spiritual discernment.

There are many ways to discern God's leading. We could make a list of pros and cons, we could seek advice, we could try to come to a consensus, or we could simply draw straws (that's in the Bible, after all). We could draft SMART goals, analyze metrics, focus on long-range planning—all those things are legitimate tools, but our primary determination for pacesetting should be spiritual discernment.

This process of getting clarity on the voice of God takes time and requires diverse voices to speak into your situation. We might be so focused on the end goal of our mission that we lack the patience to incorporate other perspectives in this process, especially perspectives that may starkly differ from our own, but, brothers and sisters, believe that engaging in spiritual discernment for yourself or for your leadership team can strengthen ministry opportunities as much as Paul's listening to the Holy Spirit helped him stay on God's path for mission.

How fortuitous that I was assigned this passage to preach on, for Acts 16:16-40 is part of my story of coming to faith in Christ. It was my freshman year of college at the University of Texas at Austin. At the time I was not a believer; in fact, I had made a pact with some friends the year prior to never get brainwashed into becoming a Christian. I was an independent young woman who could think for herself and certainly did not need a Supreme Being to tell me what to do. But I was also a band geek. In college I was in the UT basketball band and later the Longhorn Marching Band. I just loved playing the saxophone and looked for every opportunity to do so. In early spring of my freshman year a friend told me the nearby Evangelical Free church needed musicians for their Easter cantata. I knew my friend was trying to



evangelize me, which I did not appreciate, and I didn't care one bit about the cantata, but it was a chance to play my sax. And besides, it was for something called an Evangelism-Free Church, something like that, so I agreed.

The cantata was a play based on the story of Paul and Silas in prison. There was some cheesy acting, some music, and this "fictional" story. None of it really moved me, not even the earthquake bit. However, as the weeks of practice went on, I was moved by one completely unexpected thing that started to shake the foundations of my secular humanist worldview. It wasn't the story of Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns in worship to God; it wasn't the injustice of their beating and imprisonment; it wasn't even the miracle of the earthquake—no, I found myself being slowly converted by the face of the orchestra conductor, Pastor Larry. Pastor Larry was a tall man, and he stood majestically whenever he conducted. And when Larry conducted, he didn't just keep the beat; he worshiped. It showed in his expression, in his smile, in his eyes.

Pastor Larry made it click for me: following Christ is about worshiping the Most High God! I hadn't understood that Christianity offers a relationship with a Holy Spirit who was active and directed our lives. I always thought Christianity was about some rules. I didn't know the gospel was for me, a Taiwanese American agnostic girl who just wanted to play her sax and avoid organized religion at all costs. I had heard people talk about obeying God, but I never knew that you could love him too—until I saw the face of Pastor Larry conducting the cantata.

Gradually, stories in the Bible came alive to me. As with Lydia, the Lord opened my heart to respond to the message. Like the prisoners sitting at the feet of Paul and Silas, listening to them worship God, I could sense my intellectual chains loosening, setting me free. Gradually Paul's mission and even his sufferings made sense to me, to the point where I wanted to emulate his life. My first year out of college I went to the mission field to Mexico City. The gospel had become good news to me, and it was for everyone, everywhere. It was for the young and the old, the incarcerated and the free, the wealthy and the poor, the educated and the simple, for professionals and laborers, monoethnic people and mixed, oppressors and the oppressed.

Looking back, I am in awe of how the pacesetting in Acts 16 paralleled what was transpiring at my college

church in those years. This majority white church had a diverse staff: an Asian pastor, a Hispanic ministries pastor, and pastor Larry, who was African American. But the congregation was 95% white. Around the time I started attending, there was a sudden massive influx of Asians—second-generation Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean Americans—and this influx was due to the popularity of a newly hired college minister.

The Asian invasion was entirely word of mouth. My first visit to the college ministry, I recall seeing about three Asian people out of about 90 students. By the time I graduated, the college ministry had exploded to hundreds of students, the majority of whom were Asians. I have an old picture that I took from the balcony of the gym, which we used as overflow seating, and you can clearly see a sea of black hair. This demographic change of the church was not planned, it was not predicted, it was not even strategized. The Holy Spirit set the pace, and the church followed it into a new reality.

In his commentary on the books of Acts, Willie James Jennings writes, "Acts is the story of a God who will not release us to isolations, social, economic, cultural, religious, gendered, and geographic. This is why the book of Acts will always be contemporary, always of this present age and this current moment. We are constantly trying to catch up with the Spirit and keep pace with a God who is calling forth the new creature in the Spirit. That new creature in the Spirit collapses diaspora and empire into each other and seeks to weave together a breathtaking joining" (pp. 11-12). In Acts 16, God shook the foundation of the church and deconstructed rigid ways of worship and fellowship. He is still doing that today!

Brothers and sisters, you never know whom God is going to use or how he will incorporate disparate perspectives and personalities and circumstances into a cohesive narrative that might open the door—literally, as in the case of Paul and Silas—to a new mission field. I urge you to practice spiritual discernment, to know when there's a NO, a SLOW, or a GO, to learn holy indifference, and to pay attention to how God is setting the pace in your midst.

O Lord, May you grant us eyes to see and ears to hear your leading. Give us wisdom to discern your pacing so that we don't miss the wondrous things you are doing in our lives and communities. In Jesus's name, amen.