

## ***Ordinary Becoming Extraordinary***

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church  
May 26, 2019

**Rev. Melody Duncanson-Hales and Rev. Dave Le Grand**

### **Melody:**

One of my favourite movies is 2005's *Junebug*. It is an intimate, perceptive, American indie about a favorite son who returns to his family home in North Carolina, big city art-dealer wife in tow. I love this film for the ways it depicts the details of relationships – family, community – in a rural context. One of the very best lines is spoken by actress Amy Adam's character, Ashley: "God loves you just the way you are, but loves you too much to let you stay that way."

Isn't that the way it is in relationship with the Divine? That while we are loved for who we are and where we are, God is not content to allow us to stay in the same place, or even to stay the same person? In our relationship with the sacred, in our relationships with one another, we are transformed. Our ordinary moments become... extraordinary.

### **Dave:**

But it doesn't always feel that way. As the Yiddish adage goes: "People plan, God laughs".

Yes, God *had* shown Peter a vision of Jews sharing the gospel among the gentiles. And yes, Paul *had* taken up that calling, leaving Jerusalem to travel throughout Asia with companions such as Silas to share that good news. But we have read that Paul and his companions "were 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.*"

Have you ever had that feeling? Overwhelmed? Stopped cold by indecision? When faced with a world of pain and injustice, do you ever feel as if you are only one person, not at all equipped to handle such overwhelming odds? We wonder – who am I to make a difference? How can one person effect change? How can I know where God is calling me?

### **Melody:**

These are good questions, it seems to me. In their very essence they presume that God is active in the ins and outs and options of our days. And yet, too, too often, we do not pause long enough to listen, long enough to hear. I wonder what would happen if that should change. Indeed, I wonder what I would hear if I were even half as open as Paul was in today's reading from Acts where he receives a vision of a new way, a way not pre-planned and scheduled. Would I pick up and go as he and his companion did?

### **Dave:**

I believe there is a hint of the song of the Holy Spirit in the story before us today. We can even find it in a shift of the story teller's perspective. As we begin our story today,

Paul is referred to in the third person. But very quickly, “They” turn into “We.” The perspective is not someone else’s, but our own. *We*, followers of Christ in all times and places, are invited to join these apostles on their journey.

Lydia is an inspiring figure in our scripture. Not only is she female, but she is a woman whose business has made her wealthy and the head of her household, a rarity in patriarchal Macedonia. Her influence spans both provinces of Asia and Europe. And she is not only Greek, a gentile, but also a Godfearer – not yet a full member of the Jewish community.

### **Melody:**

Paul does not bring the Holy Spirit to this encounter with Lydia. It is THE HOLY SPIRIT THAT goes ahead of Paul, ahead of us, busily breaking down all sorts of barriers. So, we should not be surprised Lydia’s gender, social and even racial status present no real obstacle to the Spirit’s convicting work. The Spirit has been working in Lydia even before she met Paul.

God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to let us stay that way. In this encounter, both Paul and Lydia are changed. Whatever Paul has to say about Jesus proves engaging and convincing, and she and her household are eventually baptized. But she moves beyond simply having water poured on her – she responds to this new relationship with gratitude and generosity. And her offering changes Paul. Due to the customs and context of the time, it would be difficult for a good Jewish boy like Paul to enter a foreigner’s home. Wouldn’t Paul stumble just a bit over Lydia’s threshold? After all, she’s a gentile. She’s a woman. She’s rich. Yet Lydia “persuades” us. And “we” accept her hospitality. And Lydia becomes one of the key leaders of the emerging Christian movement. An ordinary moment, recorded in a few short sentences of the book of Acts, now become extraordinary.

### **Dave:**

When you think about it, if these ordinary people could be called to follow the life of Jesus, that gives us hope as well.

I don’t know about you, but I rarely feel like the best of the best. Often I feel less than; even accomplishing one ordinary task would seem like a herculean effort. But reading this encounter between Paul and Lydia – where *we* are invited into this story – where the Holy Spirit is alive and at work, moving us to transforming gratitude and generosity, gives me hope.

We are all called to live in faith, offering compassion and hope to those we encounter. We are also called to share our gifts with our partners and ministries of Mission and Service, those whom we have not met in person, but ***we do know*** through the stories shared with us thanks to Mission and Service when we hear Minutes for Mission and we read Mandate magazine.

Following the teachings of Jesus to love one another and to love our neighbour is at the very core of our faith. Love is the one constant; when we love one another, it fills our

heart and the heart of the person whom we love. We may not understand or be familiar with another person's experience, but we can love them, and they can love us.

Loving one another is one of the most profound ways we can offer compassion and hope to those we encounter, because through that love, others can be encouraged to take a chance on accomplishing extraordinary tasks.

### **Melody:**

Before we ever set out to find God, we are found. Before we seek to understand, we are understood. Before we can make any gesture to love another, we are loved. Completely, passionately, unflinchingly. And in this love, we can never stay the same, be the same. We are changed in our encounters with the Holy Spirit, in our encounters with each other.

With this Spirit, in 2018, the United Church of Canada was moved to more strongly clarify the resourcing and distribution of the gifts to the Mission and Service. Starting in January 2019, the Mission and Service of our church resources only the Ministry and Mission – partners local and global – to further the kin-dom of God. No longer does the Mission and Service support governance, the administrative of our institutional church. We have given our Mission and Service wings to more fully and transparently support what God is calling us to do.

In my work with you, in this United Church of ours, I have seen the depth and height, the deep wealth of experience as lives are changed for the better. You've seen me over the years, laugh and wipe away a tear or two as I describe to you the ways you are at work with God in this world that God loves so very much, the ways ordinary people do extraordinary things, in the ministry of our shared Mission and Service.

This morning in North Bay, a child wakes up in her very own home, not in danger of being evicted, but safe and secure in the house that her parents helped to refurbish – you, moved by God's love, made that happen today.

### **Dave:**

"I'd like everyone here to help me out here. When I say, 'Moved by God's love,' would everyone respond, 'We made that happen.'"

Moved by God's love ... **We made that happen.**

This afternoon, in South River United Church, a group of women meet over coffee to support one another to change their lives for the better, caring for each other after abuse and trauma.

Moved by God's love ... **We made that happen.**

Today in hospitals across this country, prayers are whispered, hands are held, scripture sung, as a chaplain comforts those who are sick and dying.

Moved by God's love ... **We made that happen.**

At airports in Toronto, Calgary, Montreal and Halifax, refugees are welcomed to their new home. In Palestine, farmers work in their olive groves, protected from violence and free from fear. On a Kenyan mountain, surrounded by farmers' fields, young girls go to

school – a safe place where they can escape child marriage and female genital mutilation.

Moved by God's love ... **We made that happen.**

And pictured behind me is Alex, a participant in the Wampum-Neechi Camp at Five Oaks. This project brings together Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth together over six days in the summer at Five Oaks to forge new friendships across cultures, enjoy summer days together, and learn about Indigenous (Haudenosaunee and Cree) history and cultural values. These friendships will foster healthy dialogue, reconciliation and relationship building between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Moved by God's love ... **We made that happen.**

**Melody:**

Dave and I chose Alex's picture to share with you today, because we believe this ordinary moment frozen in photograph speaks to the extraordinary good news offered us through our experience of Paul and Lydia, through our experience in the Mission and Service of the United Church of Canada. People called together in the Holy Spirit, called to love, called to partnership, called to relationship. People called to God's love – not to stay the same, but to be transformed. Ordinary people accomplishing extraordinary things.

**Dave:**

How is God calling you today?

Intro by Rev. Melody Duncanson Hales

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