

## **Drawn In: Listening - Acts 16:6-15**

Norwalk Christian Church, February 16, 2019, Drawn In Series, Year C, Epiphany, Non-Lectionary

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It's probably been since 1872 that our church has worshipped at another location other than that dirt at 701 Main Street, where our church settled after three years of wandering in this community. It feels different this morning. A bit disorganized (and this darn snow doesn't make it any easier). But look around you for a moment.

You are Norwalk Christian Church. And wherever you are--wherever we are--we are the church. If you believe that, I want you to repeat after me and say it like you mean it: We are the church! We are the church!

This Sunday reminds me of the time Marti and I, Taylor, with baby Finn on the way, first visited a church we fell in love with when we were living in New Orleans, First Grace United Methodist Church. It was also in mid-February, and our first Sunday was their last Sunday in their sanctuary before they worshipped for several months in their fellowship hall. They, too, were doing a renovation, remodeling their sanctuary in their continued post-Katrina rebuilding.

The next Sunday we visited, they were all crammed into their fellowship hall. There were enough seats, but not enough for us to spread out and avoid each other. So we had to meet people! We couldn't be anonymous if we tried. And we met so many people who would become so important to us. Stephanie, Margaret, Mertis, Nicole, Jacinto.

We fell in love with those people. With that church. And all while it was in transition. Not long after, we'd bring newborn baby Finn with us. Then we decided we had to join that church, a decision that would uproot our lives. As we journeyed with that faith community, we began hearing something. That this place where we were and loved was not where we were supposed to be. What we were hearing was a call from the pews, back into congregational ministry.

Joining that church gave us the space to listen, and it changed our lives, setting us on a road that led to our becoming clergy with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). It led us from New Orleans to Abilene, and then to you (and next week, by the way, is the 5th anniversary of our first visit to Norwalk).

There's something about being in a new space that opens us up. It's disorganized. Unfamiliar. We can't just go with the motions. We can't just do things the same way. We are forced to think. To reassess. To listen.

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In a now famous interview from the 90s, the reporter Dan Rather interviewed Mother Teresa. He, like so many of us, marveled at her discipline and her tremendous ministry among the poor in Calcutta.

And Rather wanted to know, what was the secret to her prayer life. So he asked her, “When you pray, what do you say?” She responded, “I don’t say anything, I just listen.” So Rather, a little taken aback by her answer and still searching for that secret, asked her, “Well then, what does God say?” And Mother Teresa, now Saint Teresa, said to him, “Oh, nothing, [God] just listens too.”

We’ve been talking about being Drawn In and our calling to be co-creators with God in the world. To dream a dream, hover over it, and then take the risk to step out and begin bringing that dream to a reality. But our next step in the creative process is listening.

Because, if you haven’t noticed, creativity doesn’t always go the way you think it will. In art. In church. In life. All of life, it seems, is a bit of an improvization. The sculpture falls apart. No one likes the song but you. What you always thought you’d do with your life--it doesn’t work out.

And we’re faced with a decision in that moment. Do we give up on the dream? Do we proceed, ignoring the warning signs along the way? Or, do we stop and listen?

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Listening at the heart of our text this morning. Acts 16 falls right in the midst of what we call Paul’s second missionary, and he’s traveling with his companion, Silas. We talk a lot about Paul’s work, but really, Paul never did this alone. He always had companions with him. And they had set out to go on this straight journey. They had it all planned out. They’d go to Lystra (where they pick up Timothy) then to Derbe and on to Iconium, in a straight line to Ephesus...or so they thought. Three times during this journey, Paul’s anticipated route changes. Our text today, we see that third change.

Listen to carefully again to what happened: *“When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.”*

Did you hear it? Yes, Paul had a dream, a man from Macedonia calling for help. But there’s something else in there, hidden in the words chosen.

It starts off, when *“they had come...They attempted...spirit of Jesus didn’t allow them....they went...and then, the language shifts. Paul had a vision, and then, the scripture says, ‘WE immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called US to proclaim the good news to them.’”*

The book of Acts was written by a man named Luke. The same person that wrote the Gospel of Luke. And what we know about Luke was that he was a physician, a tremendous writer, and he was a companion of Paul on his missionary journey.

In the book of Acts, when the travelogue changes from “They” to “We”, we know that Luke, the author, has joined in the journey. Somewhere in Paul’s travels, Luke joins them. Luke chose not to tell the story, only to change the pronouns. And after Luke joins, Paul has a vision.

What if Luke joined, and then started talking, I know you’re headed to Ephesus, Paul, but have you thought about Macedonia? They really need you down there. You’ve been to Ephesus before. But have you thought about Macedonia? And that night, Paul sleeps, and has a vision. He wakes up, and believe that the spirit had called to them to go to Macedonia, which would change the course of the church forever. But maybe, maybe Luke’s the one who started it all.

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Now, I’m not saying the Spirit wasn’t at work. What I’m talking about is HOW the Spirit work. We expect signs in the sky. Deep feelings in our gut. Certainty. The cards pointing our lives in the right direction. But reading scripture, that doesn’t seem to be the way the Spirit works. That’s not how the Holy Spirit leads. That’s not how God Creates.

Creation is an improvisation. God, dreaming, hovering over the waters, taking a risk, but then listening. Hearing from the waters that they need fish, from the skies they need birds, from the land they need animals. And then hearing from God’s self that God needs companionship too. God needs humanity.

God creates; God listens; God creates some more.

Why should our creative process--our life journey--be any different?

Our lives, they are not fixed. Our creative process in this world is not set in stone. Creativity requires we dream and take risks, and with that means sometimes we will fail. Sometimes we will have to give up on one thing to embrace the new headed our way.

When I heard that call in New Orleans after becoming a part of First Grace United Methodist Church, it meant I had to quit my job. We had to move as a family across the country--again--far away from our own families. We had to move to Abilene, Texas--AGAIN. But it was the best thing we could’ve done, for our calling, for ourselves, for our family.

It was unexpected, but the Spirit spoke, and we were in the right community--surrounded by people we could trust--who helped us listen.

Paul had his community--Silas, Timothy, and Luke. And this community was his voice of the Spirit. Who is your community. What do you hear? What voices do you hear calling out to you, leading you, guiding you?

In the end, our lives are no different than Paul's. The Spirit calls to us just as frequently (and as softly) as it did to Paul. And like Paul, we must listen, adapt, and follow that gentle nudge we call the Spirit.

Our path through life is never a straight one. It's not meant to be. And following that nudge--it might mean changes are on the way. It might bring difficulty or hardship. It is a risk--it's always a risk. But life isn't meant to be easy or safe.

In essence, the spiritual geography we negotiate through life is like a meandering river through the terrain, as it flows and curves and meanders toward the distant sea.

Life is all about changes. Soon the seasons will change. Soon new life will be on the horizon. May we continue to listen--sensing the flow. And as we enter this time of transition in our church life, and perhaps in our own lives as well, may we stop to hear where God is calling us.

How do we need to change? Where do we need to go? Listen for what the Spirit is saying to you. Be still, and hear the voice of God.