

**Sermon: Falling in Love**  
**Scripture: Acts 16:9-15**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: May 9, 2010**

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We are still within the Easter season of the church calendar as we move into May and approach our celebration of Pentecost. By the way, again this year we will celebrate Pentecost on Sunday, May 23<sup>rd</sup> with a large choir of Shape-Note singers. If you missed it last year, try not to miss it this year because there is a spirited intensity and haunting depth to the way the old sacred harp hymns are sung. It's a perfect way to do a Pentecost service. I kind of think of it as the white person's Gospel music 'cause it has that same capacity to blow the roof off the place with the sheer volume of it.

But before we get to Pentecost we continue through the Easter season where we press up against our lives the stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances and the way they firecracked the word of this defeated savior across the known world at the time. A few weeks ago we read about the arch-conservative Paul's experience of the resurrected Christ which transformed him from a violent persecutor of Christ followers into a nonviolent Christ follower himself willing suffer greatly for the sake of the gospel of forgiveness and love.

As we read through the Book of Acts leading up to this morning's scripture that Don read, we read of Paul sailing for days and weeks and months across the Mediterranean from city to town and back again, struggling with sickness and imprisonment and dissent from some of his cohorts and challenges to his mission from the apostles back in Jerusalem but also preaching and healing people and building a expansive community of Christ followers. Certain commentators on the scripture suggest that with the route Paul was taking he was doing a similar campaign as Alexander the Great had done 300 years earlier to spread Greek thought and culture to the known world. Only Paul's was done in reverse bringing a new message from the outskirts of the Greek world directly into the depths of the Greek world in Macedonia, bringing a message of forgiveness and salvation rather the spread of an empire as Alexander did and of course Paul's was no military campaign as Alexander's was. Alexander was conquering people and subjecting them to his rule while Paul was conquering hearts you might say and inviting them into a commitment to God.

And so it wasn't an idea or a philosophy or a culture that Paul was spreading, it wasn't a new articulation of truth, rather what Paul was sharing, which he referred to as "folly to the wise Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews", was the introduction of a person; not a new idea but a new relationship. Truth, for Paul, was no longer a philosophical proposition but rather truth was a person; namely Jesus Christ. Interestingly though as we read Paul's letters that fill the last half of the New Testament, you realize that Paul was not interested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, what he did and said and how he lived, really. Paul remarkably has almost nothing in his writings about Jesus' teachings and his earthly life. For Paul the person of Jesus that he wants to share is the very real resurrected present presence of Christ in his life and in the lives of those who receive his hospitality and in turn offer it to others. For Paul, truth is a person and coming to that truth is about a mystical experience of Christ's presence that engenders love and peace and a spirit of forgiveness in the beholder.

Interestingly, our tendency to say we accept Jesus primarily as an ethical teacher of right behavior is much more a Greek philosophical approach than it is a Christian approach. No doubt ethical and right living is critical to the Christian life but key to Christian ethics is that ethical behavior is the result of a relationship first. We have been received, forgiven, loved by God unconditionally as demonstrated in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus and so our response is to live lives of love, acceptance, forgiveness in response. But the relationship comes first.

And so approaching truth becomes no longer a consenting of the mind but an opening of the heart. Consider love for a moment. We can talk about love til the cows come home and we can consider the effects of love and the sources of love and we can even locate where feelings of love are generated from the brain and all that is good and well. But the only way to know the truth of love is to enter into it. To know love we've got to love. And that, Paul says, as Jesus did, is the doorway into knowing the truth of God. The pathway is love and obviously love is not something that we can do by ourselves and in our heads but is something that must be done in relation to others and from our hearts or our souls.

Do we want to know the God of our lives, our source and giver of meaning and our destination, then we must seek that knowing from the starting place of the heart, which means from the experience and process of loving, of being loved and loving

others. And that seems easy enough until we remember or realize how vulnerable to pain loving *fully* makes us. And this is the BIG problem; so enters our negotiating and nit picking minds to dissect the experience from the outside, to lessen our suffering, give us more control, and ultimately separates us from God and one another, and so the relationship breaks and the soul flees back into the recesses of our person and we think what is God, who is God, what is truth, I don't get it! But we know we are missing something, we feel some kind of hole at the center of our lives, some sense of restlessness because we are no longer doing that which we were built to do which is to be in relationship of love with our Source.

This is what Paul was running around talking to people about. This is what he was inviting people into; not a new way of thinking but into a new relationship or a renewed relationship with the God of their lives. And people, like Lydia in the scripture this morning were convicted by it, were suddenly struck broadside by the very real, albeit mystical, quality of this relationship. Her heart was struck and smitten, her desire fulfilled, she fell in love with God.

And that's the great moment of conversion, from a Christian perspective, it's not when we finally assent to certain ideas and particular beliefs, but when we fall in love with God and realize that our very hearts were made for such a relationship. And so maybe the question "do you believe in God" could be replaced with "do you love God?" Or "Are you in love with God?" Don't you know that amazing experience of being in love where the world is transformed before your very eyes, the sky seems to be the limit, time falls away, and the beloved's name is whispered in the rustling of leaves of the trees and his or her face is reflected in a sunset and it's like the music you hear was written for the two of you, and the world itself is brightened by simply the presence of the other AND to know that we are beheld in the eyes and heart of the other in that same way! Wow. That experience is at the very heart of our faith and religious tradition – a falling into Love; so much more so than words and creeds and propositions of truth and beliefs. It's about falling in love again...