

“Not Knowing Where You’re Going”

Acts 16:9-15

6th Sunday of Easter

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Ben Dorr

In one of his blogposts, the entrepreneur and writer Seth Godin describes what he calls the “Goldie Hawn problem.”

What is the Goldie Hawn problem?

Godin writes:

“Just over two hundred years ago, Edward Rutledge signed the Declaration of Independence. His direct descendants are Goldie Hawn and Kate Hudson.

“What sort of odds,” Godin asks, “would you have been willing to lay on that bet?”

“You could be standing at his deathbed in 1800, with complete and total knowledge of his genetic makeup and the society in which he lived, and the chances that you’d predict this outcome would certainly approach zero.”

Moving on from this example, Godin highlights our DESIRE to know the future, and our “inability to see ahead.”

“We are now experts at the micro-physics of collisions, at predicting how a billiard ball will roll or how long it will take a penny to hit the ground if we drop it off the Empire State Building...But add one or two or three hundred generations, and we’re always (always) going to get it wrong...

“The essential thing to remember...is that every project is the work of...generations, of decisions leading to decisions, of the unpredictable outcomes that come from human interactions. Given how unlikely it is that we’d predict Goldie Hawn, the best posture is obvious...

Expect that you’ll be surprised.”¹

¹ “Our inability to see ahead (The Goldie Hawn problem),” by Seth Godin, from February 7, 2014, at http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2014/02/our-inability-to-see-ahead-the-goldie-hawn-problem.html.

Let me to ask you something:

When you woke up this morning,

when you started thinking about your day,

or when you stop to consider what God might do next in your life,

are you confident in your ability to plan and predict what will happen?

Or do you expect to be surprised?

I ask because of our text for today.

In our story from Acts, the Apostle Paul and his companions are ON THE ROAD. They're traveling in Asia Minor, and while they're in Troas, Paul has a vision: a man from Macedonia is "pleading" for Paul's help.

So Paul and his friends, they go to Macedonia, to the city of Philippi, where they meet—not the man who appeared to Paul in his vision, but a woman named Lydia.

Lydia hears Paul, is baptized by Paul,

and then she invites Paul and his fellow travelers to stay in her home.

Now...when Paul was still in Asia Minor, did Paul say to his group:

"Let's go over to Europe,

and let's find a dealer in purple cloth named Lydia,

because I think she's a good prospect for God's church!"???

No. Lydia was nowhere on Paul's radar screen.

God led Paul to Lydia, and God led Lydia to Paul, in a way that neither Paul nor Lydia could not see ahead of time.

This may seem like such a small, random story in Paul's life.

But I am very touched by this story.

You see, the subject of our sermon this morning is **the future**.

Why is the future on my mind today?
Perhaps because it's the end of May, beginning of summer.

Has anyone here been to a graduation ceremony recently?
Or will any of you be going to one soon?

If you have or if you will, as you sit in the crowd of people waiting for your loved one's name to be called, you may find yourself thinking about the future.

As in, how did THIS FUTURE arrive in my life so quickly?
My daughter was heading off to kindergarten just yesterday!

Or your son is graduating with honors from college.
He doesn't have a job yet.
He may be wandering for a bit.
Will you be ok as he wanders?
Will you walk alongside him as he figures out his life?

Have any of you spent any time recently thinking about the future?
Perhaps you're considering retirement soon.
Perhaps you're thinking about starting a family soon.

If you've done any of that kind of planning or reflecting or worrying, let me invite you to consider our text for today one more time.

You see, the FIRST thing that Lydia's story tells us
is that God is at work in our lives and in our futures,
in ways that we CANNOT plan, CANNOT predict,
CANNOT control.

In his autobiography, *Breaking Barriers*, newspaper columnist Carl Rowan tells about a teacher who greatly influenced his life.

Rowan relates how this teacher, Frances Thompson,
 had given him a sense of his opportunities
 in God's great creation.

One day, she read a quote to him:

*“Make no little plans;
 they have no magic to stir our blood
 and probably in themselves will not be realized.
 “Make big plans: aim high in hope and work...”*

In a speech some thirty years later, Rowan recounted that event, and HOW THAT ONE LITTLE QUOTE FROM ONE TEACHER shaped and influenced his life.

After a newspaper printed the story, someone mailed the clipping to Frances Thompson. She responded, writing to Rowan:

*“You have no idea what that newspaper story meant to me.
 For years, I endured my brother's arguments
 that I had wasted my life—
 that God wanted more for me,
 that I should have done something ‘better’
 with my life.*

“When I read that you gave me credit for helping to launch your marvelous career, I put the clipping in front of my brother.

*After he read it, I said, ‘You see, I didn't waste my life, did I?
 In God's great world, my life
 has made a difference.’”²*

What are your plans for the future?
 Will your future go just like you think it's going to go?
 Or do you expect, do you HOPE, that God might surprise you?

² Carl T. Rowan, *Breaking Barriers: A Memoir*, Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1991.

This seems to me to be a particularly relevant question, not just for this time of year, but for this time in the life of our church.

- Were any of you here last Sunday at the second service?
Over 30 people became part of Westminster's church family last Sunday.
- If you were here two months ago when Bibles were handed out to 3rd graders, you may have noticed that over 50 names were read that Sunday. Think about that for a moment.
- We had a wonderful confirmation class of 19 ninth graders join our church this year. Six years from now, when our current 3rd graders are 9th graders, we could have 50 confirmands standing up front on Mother's Day of 2025!

So one of the questions that we as a staff have been asking ourselves lately is how do we plan for all this?

What is the future of Westminster Presbyterian Church going to look like?

If the trends continue, how do we keep up with the growth?

How do we keep our new members connected and plugged in beyond worship on Sunday mornings?

How do we structure our youth programming not just for the 100 that were often attending on Sunday evenings this past year, but for the potential number of youth in future years?

It's a good problem to have.

It's a fun problem to have.

Make no little plans...

That's good advice for Westminster.

And in the midst of our planning for the future and our budgeting for the future and dreaming about our church's future...I think today's text is an important one to recall.

Our calling, as disciples of Jesus,
 is not to know the future,
 or to get the future to look like our image of what it needs to look like.

Our calling is to take the next step in faith...to step into the future that God
 is giving us, no matter what that step looks like...

Samuel DeWitt Proctor was a minister, educator, and humanitarian.

He was President of North Carolina A&T University.
 He was pastor of an 18,000-member Baptist Church in Harlem.

Recipient of 45 honorary degrees in his life,
 he was in high demand as a preacher and speaker.

Late in his life, he was asked to preach at Duke Chapel one Sunday.
 Dr. Proctor was known for his incisive insight and careful analysis of
 Biblical texts.

But on this Sunday, that's not what he offered up.
 After reading the text for the morning,
 he just started talking about his life:
*"Growing up, I always wanted a
 red Buick convertible."*

He told about growing up in Norfolk, Virginia, and how he began to work in
 the Norfolk Navy Yard as a young man. He did well, and was the first African-
 American in management at the Navy Yard.

As he began to rise through the ranks,
 he had his heart set on *that red Buick convertible*.

Not only the car, he said, but *a three-piece red silk suit* to go along with it!

Well, about this time, he began to feel a call to ministry.
 As he worked through this, he faced TWIN challenges:
 First, those around him were saying he shouldn't derail his career at the
 Navy Yard.

“You are helping your people,” he was told.

“You are a role model!”

“You are a trail blazer—people are counting on you!”

He was told, very bluntly,
that he would RUIN his life if he went into the ministry.

Second, there was the matter of what he had already set his heart on:
his future was supposed to include a *red Buick convertible*.

So Dr. Proctor is going on and on about all this.

About the Navy Yard, and silk suits, and red convertibles...after about 20 minutes, even his biggest admirers were wondering where he was going with it all.

Just then, he looked right at that packed sanctuary and he said:

“I NEVER owned a red Buick convertible.

I wanted one—God knows how I wanted one.”

And then Dr. Proctor SMILED, as he said with joy:

“God help you...if YOU are ever met by Jesus.”

And he sat down.³

***What is your capacity for SURPRISE in your life of faith?
What is your capacity to let go of the future you had in mind...for the
future that God is giving you?***

Look, my capacity for surprise is not so good.
I know that comes as a great shock to all of you.

I’m a type A personality, I like to plan things out.

³ As told by Will Willimon in his sermon at the Festival of Homiletics, Minneapolis, MN, May, 2014.

Sometimes, I confess, I get a voice inside me that says,
 “Listen here, Lord—
 I’ve got a good idea where my life needs to go!”

Have you ever said something like that to God?

Imagine if Paul had said this to God in Acts, chapter 16.

If you read just a couple verses earlier in the 16th chapter of Acts, Luke tells us that Paul tries to go to Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus—as our text puts it—the Spirit of Jesus says no, this isn’t the way you need to go.

So Paul went to Troas, where he had the vision that told him to go to Macedonia, which in turn led him to Lydia.

But what if, instead of changing direction...what if Paul had FOUGHT IT?

What if Paul had said to God, “Look here, I’ve done good work in Asia, I’m going to keep traveling in Asia, no need for me to over to Europe?”

Then we’ve got no conversion of Lydia.
 And we’ve got no conversion of Lydia’s household.

And you may say to yourself, well...what’s the big deal?
 According to Acts, Lydia is the first Christian convert in Europe.

How many of you have ancestors who came from Europe?
 European ancestors, who has ‘em in this room?

Yes, yes.

Now there’s no way to get an exact trace of Lydia’s faith to other Europeans to your Europeans to the faith that’s now a part of you...there’s no way to go back and prove it.

But I wouldn’t be surprised.

I wouldn’t be surprised if Lydia was an ancestor in the faith for you...or for you...or for you...

What is your capacity to be surprised—
 by the next person God sends to you,
 or the next job God gives to you,
 or the next sacrifice God asks you to make,
 or the next step outside your comfort zone God asks you to take?

The preacher Tony Campolo tells of a time when he was in Hawaii and because of jet-lag, he was wandering the streets at 3:30 in the morning, looking for a place to eat breakfast.

He finds a café, orders a doughnut, and this portly guy behind the counter wipes his grimy hand on his apron, and hands Campolo the doughnut.

As he eats the doughnut, eight or nine women from the street walk in.

They're loud, they're obnoxious, Campolo is uncomfortable and about to leave when the one sitting behind him says to her friend, "Tomorrow's my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

"So whaddaya want from me?" her friend asks.

"You want a birthday party? You want me to get ya a cake and sing Happy Birthday?"

"Come on," said the first woman. "I was just telling you—you don't have to be nasty about it. I haven't had a birthday party in my whole life—why should I have one now?"

After the women had left, Campolo got an idea.
 He asked the guy with the greasy apron:

"Do they come here every night?"

"Yeah," Harry said. Harry's the guy with the greasy apron.

"The one who sat next to me, she comes every night?"

"Yeah. That's Agnes. She's here every night—why do you want to know?"

“Because I heard her say tomorrow is her birthday. What do you think about throwing her a birthday party right here, tomorrow night?”

A smile crept across Harry’s face.
 “That’s great. I love that idea.”

So Campolo returned the next night, decorated the café, had a big banner that read, “Happy Birthday, Agnes!”—and word had gotten out on the street about the party, so by 3:15am, all sorts of people had shown up.

At 3:30am the doors swung open,
 in walked Agnes and her friends—and her mouth hit the floor.

As everyone sang happy birthday, Agnes started to cry.

Harry had made a cake, and said, “Cut the cake, Agnes.”

But Agnes said, “Do you mind if I take the cake home with me like this, so I can show my mother? I just live a couple blocks from here. I’ll be back, I promise.”

And at that, Agnes left with the cake.

Well, no one knew what to do, so Campolo said, “Why don’t we say a prayer?”

And in a circle, with Harry and all the others, Campolo prayed for Agnes. When he finished, Harry leaned over the counter:

“Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?”

Campolo answered: “I belong to a church that throws parties at 3:30 in the morning [for anyone who needs one].”

Harry waited a moment, then he said, “No you don’t. There’s no church like that. If there was, I’d join a church like that.”⁴

⁴ Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000. A bit of the language was modified from the original story so that it would be appropriate for the pulpit.

Now don't misunderstand.
My vision for our church's future is NOT parties in the Atrium at 3:30am every week.

But I do believe that we would do well to take a good look at that café.
As you pick up a donut after worship today...think about that café.

A café that welcomed all types of people.

A café that went out of it way to say:

We care about you.

We will feed you.

No matter your past, no matter your pain...
we may even throw a party for you!

That doesn't just sound like a cafe.

That sounds like a church.

In fact, it sounds like the kind of church that I have been called to serve, that you have been called to be a part of right here at Westminster.

What does that mean for our future?

I hope God will surprise me.

I hope God will surprise you.

Amen.