

We will be reading two scriptures today even though only Acts 16 is listed. Since this is the second week of a series on the book of Philippians and we are asking today for the real Philippians to stand up, both John and I felt it would be good to actually read the opening of the letter: the 'to' and 'from' lines and Paul's initial greeting. So let's start with Philippians 1.1-2:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons
Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

WILL THE REAL PHILIPPIANS PLEASE STAND UP?

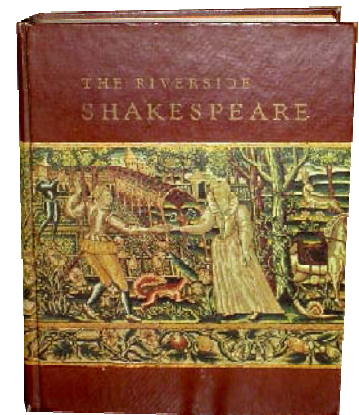
January 14, 2008
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Philippians 1.1-2
Acts 16.6-15

How many of you have read, at some point, a play by William Shakespeare?

What was at the very beginning of the play? And note that it doesn't matter if the play you read was one of his comedies or tragedies or histories. What is at the beginning is always the same.

It is a **cast of characters**: the names of everyone who will appear on stage shortly and a word or two about who they are. And for me as a college student at Seattle Pacific University these cast lists at the beginning of each play were a life line when I was required to take a class exclusively on Shakespeare and spent hours upon hours in the library with my massive brown Riverside Shakespeare volume reading about Henry and Hamlet, Iago and Desdemona, Puck and Peaseblossom, Petruchio, Katharina, Benedick, and Beatrice.



The cast list kept me from getting lost in the dense dialog, and helped me at times in interpreting how to read this line or that.

And it strikes me that it might be helpful to establish just such a cast for us today as we launch into a sermon series on the book of Philippians. If we were just spending a weekend or two in Philippi, it might not be necessary, but between now and Easter we will be spending every Sunday in Macedonia (part of modern day Greece) reading a letter over the shoulders of the Philippians that was sent to them by Paul.

The letter itself is something of a thank-you note or more specifically a letter from an active missionary to a church of supporters—expressing gratitude for their spiritual and financial partnership over the years. Of course it turns out to be much more—as we will see in the coming weeks—but at least this is how it begins.

And if we were to establish a cast of characters, obviously **Paul** would be among them. Paul: the apostle to the Gentiles, consummate letter writer and congregation-planter, early church adventurer and frequent prisoner, decorated Pharisee and former attack dog and persecutor of Christians.

Then there is **Timothy**: side-kick and protégé to the formidable apostle, son of a Jewish mom and Greek dad, circumcised late in life (ouch) in order to not cause unnecessary questions when the missionary team stopped off at Jewish households around Asia and Europe. Maybe you noticed that Timothy received billing alongside Paul in verse 1 of Philippians—possibly as scribe or even author of some of the letter. This is the same Timothy addressed in several other letters later in the New Testament: First and Second Timothy.

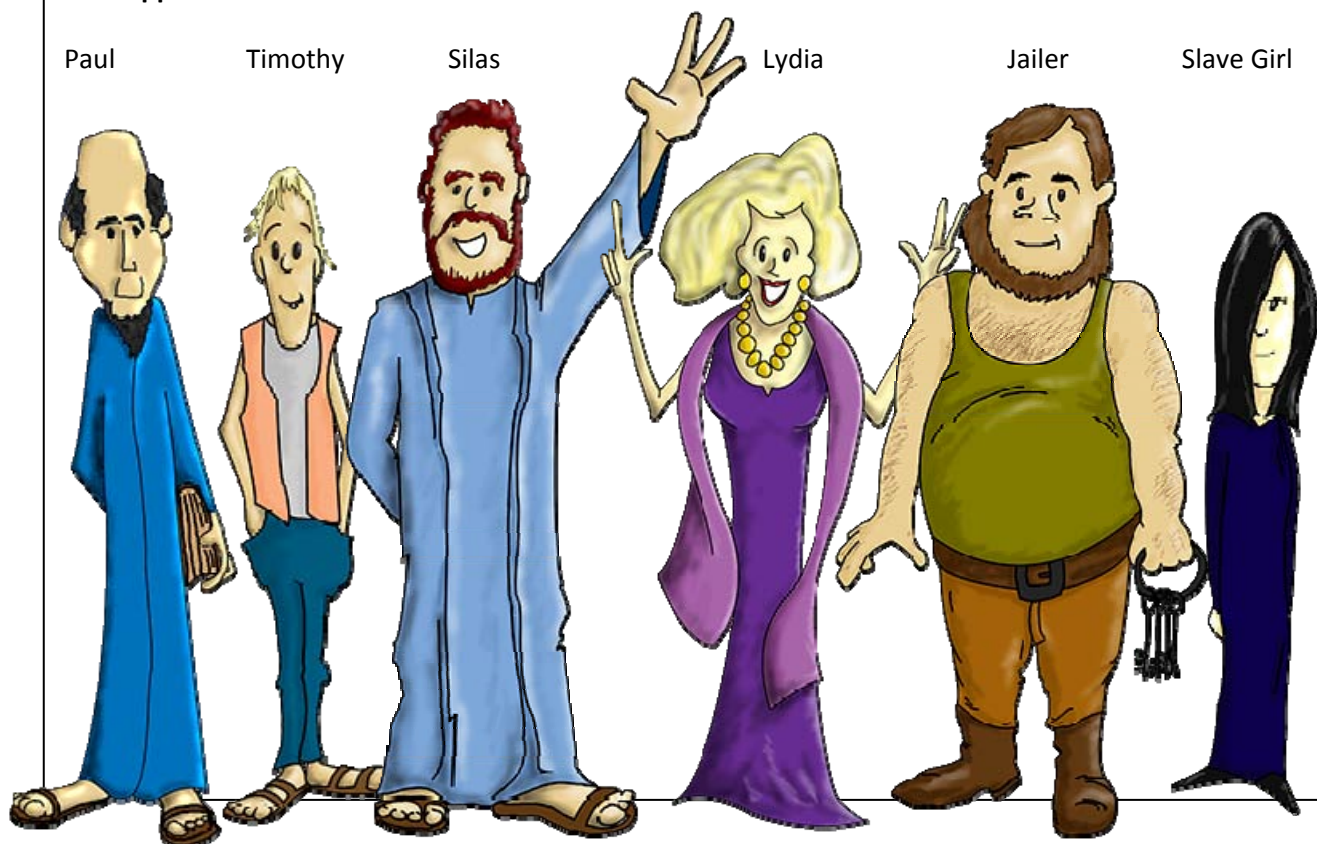
There is also **Silas** in our cast. Silas is not listed in Philippians 1.1 but he figures prominently in the founding of the Philippian church recorded in Acts chapter 16. Silas was Paul's second missionary partner after his falling-out with Barnabas, and Silas was in the thick of it in Philippi along with Paul and Timothy.

Today in our text from Acts we will also meet **Lydia**, a Philippian woman who was a believer in God and a well-funded fabric retailer specializing in high end cloth for the Macedonian rich and famous.

Also part of the Philippians cast, but not in our text today is the infamous **Philippian jailer** who becomes another early believer in Macedonia.

And of course no dramatic Early Church cast would be complete without a few villains, a mob, several lazy Roman magistrates, and a **fortune-telling slave girl**.

A Philippians Cast of Characters



Now obviously we can't tell all these stories in the next fifteen minutes, but to begin to build a picture of the people behind this letter of joy I want us to go back to Paul's arrival in Philippi recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. Listen in these verses from Acts 16 for God's word to you, beginning with verse 6:

⁶ [Paul, Silas, and Timothy] went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; ⁸ so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

So who are the real Philippians Paul writes to thank in his letter?

We just met Lydia in Acts, and in the verses that follow in Acts 16 a fortune-telling slave girl and the Philippian jailer take the stage. Yet Paul doesn't mention Lydia, the jailer, or the girl by name in Philippians. Paul does, near the end of his letter, call out two women by name, Euodia and Syntyche and tell them to stop arguing. A man called Clement is also mentioned by name.

But this is not much to go on. Who are the real Philippians?

We do know a little about the city itself from other historic sources. Philippi lies 10 miles inland from the port of Neapolis and was defensible, surrounded on three sides by mountains that contained veins of both gold and silver. The town was fortified in 350 BC by Philip of Macedonia who renamed after himself. In the present day only ruins remains—a Greek ghost town if you will—but in Paul's day Philippi anchored one end of a key trade road that connected Asia Minor with the Adriatic ports that led to Rome and other Italian cities.



We also know that the plain just west of Philippi was the scene of two huge and empire-altering Roman battles in 42 BC. Philippi watched as Mark Anthony and Octavian defeated the armies of Brutus and Cassius. And in the peace that followed, Mark Anthony settled the city with many of his war veterans

and decreed Philippi as a fully vested Roman colony. This honor made Philippi exempt from taxation and was a source of tremendous civic pride. Each citizen was granted all the rights and privileges they would have had living on actual Italian soil.

So this is a city of significance... but if Lydia and the Philippian jailer (the only Christians in Philippi we know anything about) are at all representative of the believers addressed by Paul, we are not going to be reading this letter in the coming weeks over the shoulders of the movers and shakers of Philippi.

They aren't members of some mega church with reserved seats for the mayor and the magistrates. Much more likely the church Paul and Silas and Timothy planted in Philippi—their first European congregation—was little more than a house church made up of outsiders, not insiders... made up of the marginalized.

Take Lydia from our text today. Where do they meet her? Outside the city. Most likely because the Jews and Lydia, who was probably a Gentile convert, were not allowed to gather for prayer inside the city.

We are talking literal outsiders here.

And then we are talking women... Lydia is a woman... probably single or a widow... in a male-dominated society. Strike two. The commentaries spend a significant amount of time trying to explain her apparent business prowess and success since it was so far **outside** the norm.

And strike three? Why she is also a foreigner. Her home, Luke tells us, is a trade town Asia Minor, in Turkey.

And yet it is outsider Lydia who God first chooses and calls to be a leader of the first European congregation. Luke writes: "The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

I think this is significant, and here's why.

Think about your own life—where you are an insider (if you are an insider anywhere) and where you are an outsider. Got that? Now think about where you are open and where you are closed. Open to God, open to others, even open to new ideas or change.

In my life, every time I've gotten inside some group, I've seen myself close down. What good is being inside if it isn't exclusive? If someone isn't outside?

I heard this past week about the Yellowstone Club in Montana. It bills itself the world's only PRIVATE ski and golf community. To even become a member, let alone buy a lot at the club (lots start at one million) you have to prove you are a multi-millionaire.

Now this might be extreme example, but think about it. Insiders by definition are insiders because others are not. And the moment we understand ourselves to be inside,



we consciously or unconsciously assume the vested interest of insiders. That interest? Keeping others out—those who don't fit.

I see it happen everywhere.

In college, insider status comes with grades and connections and... at times like the Yellowstone Club, cash. Politics isn't seem much different... except grades don't seem to matter. Business too. Even... church. Far too often I hear visitors say that no one talks to them after services here or elsewhere, that every congregation they visit feels like a members-only venue, that it is obvious who is in and who is out.

It wasn't any different in Philippi. Lydia was out. Sure, she sold fabric to the rich and famous, but she was still out. And maybe being outside was part of how the Lord opened her heart to listen to Paul.

I know where I feel outside I'm far more open and attentive and responsive. Where I feel outside is where I'm hard listening for good news.

In fact, let me tell you about Kevin and Wes and Todd and Adam in high school. Not one of us was an insider. I was a social pariah as a pastor's kid with blotchy freckles, poor coordination, untempered enthusiasm, and an inability to talk to any girl I liked. Wes was painfully shy and halting in his speech with everyone. Todd was a comic-book-loving, glasses-wearing, rather hefty band geek. And Adam was a thin, tall new kid who didn't seem to fit in anywhere.

You know what? I just described the members my high school Bible study. We were the ones—outsiders all—who gathered weekly for a Navigator's 2-7 Bible study: reading and discussing and memorizing scripture. Why? I think it was because we were open... like Lydia. We were hungry for fellowship and hungry to know a God who wasn't a club house god who only courted quarterbacks and cheerleaders.

And here is the kicker: I don't think a single one of us would have been open... to God or each other... if we hadn't felt outside. See any parallels in your life?

Before Christmas we talked about expecting Jesus like the shepherds—the ultimate outsiders in the Christmas story. Here we are again... this time in Philippi... outside with Lydia. And not just Lydia: go home and read the rest of Acts 16. Meet the Philippian jailer... another outsider... and the slave girl who can tell the future but is little more than a lucrative pet on a leash for her masters. She is so far outside she doesn't even count as a person.

After Paul rebukes the spirit in her, she became worthless as a source of income for her masters. And we have no way of knowing if she ever found her way into this Philippian church, but it would be just like God I'm coming to know to make sure she did... and wouldn't it be just like a church of outsiders to notice a now worthless slave, buy her freedom, and welcome her with joy?

Which brings me back to us... as we begin to read together what Paul has to say to the Philippians. I hope we will be on our tiptoes in the coming weeks to read over the shoulders of Lydia and the jailer, over the shoulders of Euodia and Syntyche and Clement, and, I suspect, over the shoulder of a former fortune-telling slave girl.

My prayer is that God will open our hearts in the coming weeks to listen eagerly like Lydia. And more than this, my prayer is that God will open our hearts to respond with hospitality like Lydia... and make room right here for more outsiders... outsiders like us.

Where are you outside? And where are you open?

For I am more and more convinced this is where we actually meet God... not where we are comfortably inside but where we are outside... outside the city, outside the clubs, outside the circles where we feel safe and secure and consequently closed.

I think this is where God is free to open our hearts.

Where would that be for you today? And are you willing to meet God in this place and let God open you up to listen what the Holy Spirit will say through Paul?

And one more question, who might God ask you to bring... to include... in this church of outsiders open and listening?