



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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SERMON – 6TH EASTER

ACTS 16:9-15

MAY 22, 2022

## “WITNESSING WITHOUT TURNING PURPLE”

How many of you remember the 1960's a “tour de force” of television programming – the sitcom “Get Smart” starring Don Adams? It was a farce – a whack at the so called “intelligence agencies” of government. Most everything the show dealt with was secret, but sometimes conversations were so super-secret that Agent Maxwell Smart and his chief would lower a gadget called “the cone of silence” over them, and visit under it, even if they were alone in the room. Of course, you could hear every word they said, which I suppose was the point.

Unfortunately, there is a “cone of silence” under which many Christians live – that being a self-imposed silence when it comes to talking about spiritual matters. The cone drops particularly when we are on some form of public transportation, but it drops at meals, at social functions of, and in truth, it descends even among Christians in places like...well...church. Nearly 2 in 3 Christians surveyed said in the last year they'd had fewer than 5 spiritual conversations of *any* sort with *anyone*, including fellow Christians.

Today and next week I will devote myself to the question of why this is and how to share faith. Almost the entire book of Acts is devoted to that subject, plus this gives me a chance to a plug the class we are having on spiritual conversations which still has two more sessions!

Acts 16:9-15 is almost too good to be true with regard to witnessing. There are no tongues of fire in this story, no miraculous bursting of prison doors freeing imprisoned apostles, no invitation to speak in a synagogue on how the Old Testament foretells that Jesus is the Messiah. True, the Holy Spirit does set this up (he sets up everything in Acts) by giving Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia imploring him to “*come and help us.*” Paul doesn't show up in Philippi by accident, let's concede that.

But apparently his prospects weren't so good. So, he did what we all should do when it comes to sharing our faith – look for opportunities and then roll with them. We cannot say with certainty what the religious identification of Lydia and her companions were. If they were Jews, its unusual no Jewish men were present – Jewish women deferred by custom to the instruction of men so one would have expected some to be mentioned. Whenever in the presence of Jews Acts says Paul always started with the scriptures and “argued” from them the case for Jesus as Messiah. None of this is mentioned.

Lydia is identified for us as “a worshipper of God.” No Jew would have been called thus – only Gentile “inquirers”, such as the Roman Centurion Cornelius, who in Acts 10 is identified as a “god fearer.” Paul and Silas are simply sniffing around for a place where a faith conversation can happen. They happen upon women gathered in a “place for prayer” and they're off to the races.

At this point we all put up our hands and say “*whoa...this is Paul after all, of course he's going to have a faith conversation AND it's going to lead to a conversion!*” That rarely, if ever describes our experience with faith sharing. We live in a time when talking about Jesus is about as polite and welcomed as a public expression of indigestion.

Yet, that is not entirely true. Well documented and for some personally experienced is of a conversation growing cold or a sarcastic comment being uttered when the subject turns to Jesus or the church. We are well aware of proscriptions of talking about faith in the public square, defined as the

Revelation 7 alters the worship narrative however, for nowhere in it is found Psalm 23's "my, me, and I. "In heaven's worship, there are no soloists. Every image of heaven's worship in Revelation portrays elders... angels... white clad saints, "great multitudes" as single mindedly focused on one thing- God their Savior, as Psalm 23 says God is single mindedly focused on us. In our Lutheran tradition, we speak in our baptism liturgy of the two ways God makes of us saints. We say *"God liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ... and ... in baptism we are made members of the church, the body of Christ."*

Our baptismal liturgy thus expresses beautifully the message of Psalm 23, where God shepherds us personally through this life of sin and death, and Revelation 7 where joined to others so personally shepherded through life's tribulations, we join the great multitude of God's people in worship. God is ours... we are his... and we are each other's!

Martin Luther considered the Psalms the hymnbook, prayer book and catechism of the Christian faith. In his writings, he often connected a Psalm to those expressions of Christian faith summarized in his Small Catechism - the commandments, the creed, the Lord's prayer and the sacraments of baptism and holy communion. Luther said Psalm 23 "belonged" to the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment - remember the sabbath day, and the 1<sup>st</sup> petition of the Lord's prayer, to hallow God's name. To Luther, everything in this Psalm represented worship - table, oil, water, green pastures, all expressions of God's word and sacraments that restores our soul.

And yet worship as Revelation reminds us is impossible apart from others. We can have personal devotion to God, we can make personal sacrifices for the sake of God, but we cannot "personally worship" God. For that we need others, for precisely the reason Eugene Peterson stated - we must regularly interrupt ourselves so as to attend to who God is and the community in which God has placed us. We must, as Charles Whiston said, ask God to *"take us away from ourselves and our preoccupation with ourselves"*.

I hope you like today's worship- I hope you take something away from today's worship. But I am simply glad you are worshipping, and pray it is because you know of your own dependence and reliance on God, and how good it is to be around others who are aware of it too. Salvation belongs to our God, but your response to that salvation is tied up in that of the person sitting next to you.

It's been said the root of sin is love of self. It follows that you can't truly practice love without someone other than yourself to love. You can't practice love without a community. Theologian Fleming Rutledge said *" instead of making us independent and self-centered, Jesus makes us mutually interdependent and other directed There is no other way to be a disciple of Jesus than to be in communion with other disciples of Jesus."* It is with that understanding of what we're doing here today, that I say, *"I hope you enjoy today's worship."*

Before we sing our anthem, I'd like for you to pause, just a moment, look around this room, thank God you know these other people now, in this life, for by grace you will enjoy eternity with them. Then to the King of Love... whose goodness fails never, from sinners who by grace nothing lack, sing your praises that we are his and he is ours forever. AMEN