

Communion

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[0 : 0 0] on pages 1111 and 12. That's the chapter we're going to be looking at and preaching from this morning. Something quite remarkable is happening here in this building this morning. We have one communion table. We have, well, symbolically one loaf of bread, although there are too many people here just to have one loaf, which will be broken and shared amongst the believers. We have symbolically one cup of wine, which we share in, and this is one church, one body, one congregation doing this together, and yet it is made up of people who are so different from each other.

I look at you and see different ages, some people who are really young at the beginning of life, and I see some people who have lived long lives. I see people of different nationalities, people here from Scotland, from other parts of the UK, from other parts of Europe, from North America, from South America, and I'm sure many others. I see different ethnicities, different professions, different interests, different social class backgrounds, people who grew up speaking different languages, and yet these people, you, are gathered together to do one thing together, to share in this bread, to drink this wine together. And the question is, as these diverse people, as you come together to do this to celebrate the Lord's Supper, what do you have in common with each other? What is it that can bring so many different people together? What is it that has brought us together, gathered around this one cup, this one loaf of bread? There is one group of people, one church, one body of Christ celebrating communion this morning, but what is it that makes us into one body, and not just a group of random people who happen to be sitting next to each other while they do this, as they break bread and drink wine?

And that's something that can be hard for us in celebrating communion in many evangelical churches, because we make it into a very individualistic thing. You take your piece of bread, and you eat it, you take your sip of wine, and you close your eyes, and you give thanks to God for what Jesus did for you, all of which is good, but there's something wrong if we don't also take the bread and the wine, and keep our eyes open, and look around at everyone else you're sitting there with, and give God thanks that Christ's body was broken, so that this broken body, this church, could be put back together.

Something is out of step with what we have in the New Testament of the presence of your fellow Christians is just incidental at the Lord's table. Communion challenges us to love our fellow Christians, the people sitting next to us as we do this. Its challenge is this, it asks us, do you love these other people? Do you practice forgiveness with them? Do you recognize this person sitting next to you as your brother or your sister in Christ? And do you do that enough to break bread with him, enough to share a common cup with her? Communion reminds us that the church is full of other people, full of people who are different to you, but people whom you are called to love.

To be a family with in Christ. I started off asking, what do we have in common then as we share this bread and this wine, as we share this table together? And to try and answer that question, we're focusing on Acts 16, on the chapter that we read. So, this book of the Bible that records the spread of the Christian message after the life and the death and the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus Christ. Acts was written in the Greco-Roman world roughly 2,000 years ago then in that kind of a context. And in that context, in this chapter, we have the story of, or three stories of three very different people whose lives are impacted and changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ. One is a businesswoman, one is a slave girl, and one is an ex-soldier who now runs a prison. The three people have almost nothing in common in terms of where they come from, their nationality, their age, their lifestyle, and yet they all somehow end up in the same city in Philippi, and they end up being impacted by the gospel, becoming part of one church, sitting at the same communion table together, sharing in the same bread and the same wine. So, we can ask, what do all these people in Aberdeen today celebrating the

[5 : 15] Lord's Supper have in common? But we can basically ask the same question about Acts 16, about the church in Philippi. What do these three people have in common? Well, the first person that we have is Lydia, and we have her story in verses 11 to 15. From Troas we put out to sea, we sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony, and the leading city of that district. We stayed there several days, and then they meet this woman, Lydia. Lydia is a successful businesswoman. Lydia probably was her professional name rather than her real name.

The city that she came from was in the kingdom of Lydia. Where she came from was really well known for fine clothing, for high fashion, and in her professional life, she's probably well known enough to go by the trade name Lydia, from the kingdom of Lydia, and her name says it all. The clothes that she sells are beautiful, they're expensive, they're fine, they're chic. She is synonymous with where she comes from, with this kingdom of Lydia, for everything that it stands for, with fine clothing, with fashion, with style. Her public image is really inextricably linked to the values of where she comes from. That's why they call her Lydia and not her real name. It's kind of like DKNY, a fashion label today.

And the designer at the core of that is the DK, Donna Karan. But her brand is synonymous with the NY, with New York, with New York City. Her brand is based there, it's linked to New York's image, it says urban, creative, fashionable, exciting, stylish. So this woman, DK, Donna Karan, is no longer just Donna Karan. She, her brand has engulfed who she is and how she's seen in public. She's DKNY.

And Lydia is kind of like that. She's like a DKNY of her days. We don't even know her real name. She is just Lydia. We also know that purple cloth was, was the most expensive kind of cloth that you could buy in her day. The cloth she sold in Philippi, a city in Greece, had to be imported from Thyatira in Turkey. So she is someone with trade networks, with contacts. She's an international businesswoman.

She was probably the city's agent for a cloth dealer in Thyatira. She only sells the most beautiful, expensive clothing, most likely to the wealthiest, most stylish people in her culture.

[8 : 02] We also know from the, from the chapter that she herself is international. She's from Thyatira, it tells us, and that's in Turkey. And yet she works in Philippi, in Greece. She's someone with experience of different languages and cultures and business practices. She's the kind of person who's, who's cosmopolitan, who has a really thick, well-stamped passport. She is the kind of businesswoman whose life is spent between her boutique and the airport. She's someone who's used to traveling, someone who has a professional reputation to uphold in different countries at the same time.

We also know that she is morally conscious, that she's someone who is looking for God in the midst of all of this happening in her life. We're told that she's a worshiper of God, which is a really significant detail that Luke tells us in Acts. So, she was someone who had grown up with all of the typical Greco-Roman religion of her day, where you have all kinds of gods who are responsible for success in all of the areas of your life, and you have lots of superstition that goes with that. But Lydia has grown tired of this, of the superstition of all these different little gods that she has to serve in all these different ways. And she started reading the Jewish Bible, what we have as the Old Testament, and she reads about this God who is, and there's only one God, who's the God of grace and faithfulness and love and justice and holiness. So, she isn't Jewish herself, but she believes in this one God of the

Bible, this one God of Israel. And she meets with other spiritually like-minded women together to people who think like this, and they pray together and they study the Bible together. And Paul, this Christian apostle, turns up at her Bible study group, her prayer group, and he starts speaking to them about Jesus Christ. And Acts tells us that the Lord gently opened her heart to believe this message.

She had this gentle conversion, and then she's baptized, and she makes her home the ministry center. So, she obviously has a large home with a household staff who are also baptized.

In a lot of respects, it's really easy for us to imagine Lydia in our world. Aberdeen is full of Lydia's. Bon Accord Free Church has women like Lydia. She's the businesswoman who owns the boutique with the beautiful clothes, with the successful career, with the shop in the nicest part of Aberdeen.

[10 : 43] She is the businesswoman who lives in Rubislaw Den. She's influential. She is successful. It's all happening. And in Acts 16, Jesus Christ gently breaks into her world and opens her heart, and she believes.

She hears the message of Jesus' life and death and resurrection, and it all makes sense. For her, it's the final piece of the jigsaw that she was looking for. It clicks, and she believes it.

But then, Acts tells us the story of a very different person. In verse 16, once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. So, we have a slave girl.

We don't know her name. We're not told in the chapter. She was probably in her early teens, maybe 12 years old or so. And we don't know where she came from. She may have come from Philippi originally, but many slaves were bought and sold internationally. It was an international slavery market. And some people, some scholars of the New Testament think that she was probably sold into slavery by her parents because of her weird abilities. So, she was probably an abandoned child who's now found herself as a slave in the awful position of slavery. And we're told that she was, when Luke writes this, a ventriloquist, which has a really different meaning to what we have now. So, we hear ventriloquist and we think, you know, rod and emu. You think someone who has a puppet and they can speak without opening their mouths and then the puppet does the talking. But a ventriloquist in the New Testament world was far more sinister. When Luke writes this to his original readers, he says literally that she has the spirit of a python. Okay, and that makes no sense to us when we read it first because we don't have the cultural background to get it. But if you were reading this and you were in the first group of people to read this, you would know exactly what that meant.

So, the meaning is that when he says this girl had the spirit of a python, he's speaking about, well, he's using a Greek expression that goes back to the temple of Apollo. In classical Greek mythology, there was a python that guarded that temple and the python was the god Apollo. And in that temple, according to their legend, there was a woman there called Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi. And Pythia was a woman who would make really strange sounds, which she would then interpret as messages from the Greek gods. So, in that world, if you have the spirit of a python, it's an expression that means that you're like this weird woman, the Oracle of Delphi, Pythia, that you can speak in strange voices, that you can give messages from the Greek gods. And in this slave girl's case, it says she could predict the future.

[13 : 48] She was a slave whose bizarre ability was exploited. Her owners made money from her. And in Greek culture, you have a whole class of people in society who were called ventriloquists. So, children who could, you know, small girls who could speak in the voices of grown men, who could say bizarre things, you could make predictions. Some kind of recent equivalent, although thankfully this doesn't happen as much now, would be, for example, someone who would have a child and the child would have some kind of severe deformity, and then that child would be sold to the circus to be some kind of cruel spectacle for people to come and see. The parents didn't think they could look after the child and they saw no prospect of the child growing up to be able to look after itself once they were gone and they didn't know what to do. And then some people from the circus come and offer money to buy the child and the parents do that. And then they make money from this child by people paying to come and stare at it. Thankfully, that is far less common now, but it used to happen far more in our culture. This slave girl is like that, but even more sinister. And she follows Paul around, screaming and shrieking, these men are servants of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And she kept doing this for many days, it tells us. Why does she do this? Why is this poor slave girl, this girl with a spirit of a python, doing this? Is she attracted to the gospel? Does she hate the gospel? Is she supporting Paul or opposing Paul? Is she telling the people to listen to Paul or is she trying to scare them away and make them not listen to him? Is she affirming or abusing Paul?

And the answer, I think, is both. Because this is someone who loves and hates herself and who loves and hates the message that she hears from Paul. The best way I've, I think, I've ever heard her described with an illustration is that this slave girl is like Gollum from the Lord of the Rings. She's a bizarre, tortured soul who loves herself and hates herself, who can see the power of the ring and who follows it, who loves it, who hates it. And Paul gets annoyed at what she's doing and casts out her demon.

Now, the chapter doesn't explicitly say that she was baptized, but in the context, the chapter seems to be written to imply that because this chapter is explaining how the church in Philippi was founded and how key first Christians came to be converted and have their part in it. So, the main purpose for her as a slave is now gone because of the power of Jesus Christ. And she's been set free from slavery in every sense. And this slave girl who's now freed is now part of the church. This girl is completely different to Lydia. She's a child. She has no name that we know of. She has no possessions. She doesn't even own herself because she is a slave. She's not someone who journeys internationally as a high flyer in business.

If she has journeyed internationally, if she's traveled at all, it's because she was sold into slavery and taken to another country to perform, to be a freak in a freak show. She's not in control of her life. In fact, like Lydia, in fact, the text says she's controlled by a demon. She does not have it all together. In every sense, she's a victim. She's a poor soul, a hopeless lost case, not any kind of a success story. And yet, at the same time, it seems, both Lydia, this really successful, has-it-all-together businesswoman, and this poor slave girl both become members of the same church at the same time in the same place.

And they would sit together at the same table with the same loaf of bread, with the same cup of wine. Now, what happens to this girl describes pretty accurately what would happen then in a Roman colony, because she can no longer predict the future. She's now economically useless to her owners, and she can't make them any money. So, they then pursue Paul and Silas, and they take them to the authorities. And in the Roman Empire, it was illegal to practice a non-state sanctioned religion in public. But as long as it didn't cause public scandal or damage the economy, then you could practice your other religions in private. So, the slave owners understand their culture. They're so angry that they play the race card. These men are Jews and we are Romans. So, they play to the anti-Semitism of their culture, and they play the religion card. These people are introducing a foreign religion to our public life. So, Paul and Silas are beaten publicly, and they're thrown into prison, which takes us to our third person in the story. So, while they're in that prison, there's an earthquake. And it looks like all the prisoners have escaped. And there's a jailer who's in charge of that prison. And he realizes that he has just failed professionally, because his job is to keep these prisoners under lock and key. And yet they've all escaped, not just one, every single one of them, he thinks, and could not go more badly wrong for this guy. In his life and his work and his cultural context, there's no concept of, okay, this has gone really badly wrong. I think I'll just resign and, you know, live a quiet life somewhere else and hopefully just be forgotten. I'll retire in quiet shame. The cost of failure to him was his life. And it was an epic failure. All of the prisoners are gone. And so, he pulls out his sword to kill himself, because his cultural honor code demands that of him. And he's an ex-Roman soldier, someone who has seen warfare in many places, someone who has probably killed and fought for his life.

[19 : 57] And he survived that through to retirement. Now, he's in a pretty settled job in this nice city in Philippi, supervising the prisoners in the jail there. And we don't know if he's looking for truth or meaning in his life. It's far more the case here that God comes looking for him, that God makes him ask, what is the meaning in this? So, for him, life is basically going well. He survived this hard, hard career into quite a comfortable retirement. And life is going pretty well. But then there's literally an earthquake in his life. And his successful career is over in an instant, through circumstances completely outwith his control. One minute things are fine, and then the next minute he has no choice but suicide. But Paul then intervenes and tells him, don't worry, the prisoners haven't escaped. We're all here. You don't need to do this. And trembling, he asks Paul, how can I become a Christian? How can I be saved? And then he's baptized, as are his family members.

And they also join Lydia and the slave girl as members of the Philippian church. And when you look at these three people, when you look at Lydia, when you look at the slave girl, when you look at the jailer, there are national differences. Lydia was from Turkey. The slave was probably a Greek, could have been a foreigner from who knows where. The jailer was a Roman. What could bring these three people together? There are social differences. Lydia was really rich and successful, upper class kind of wealth. The slave girl could not have been poorer. And the jailer was kind of lower middle class, kind of upper working class or something like that. But they all become members of the same church. And there are massive personal differences. Lydia was this intellectual seeker in a successful settled life. The slave girl desperately needed to be removed from her situation in life. She was hopeless and lost. The jailer probably hadn't even thought of Christianity before. Everything seemed fine. And then his world was rocked, literally. And in an instant, he had to see how much he needed to be right with God. These three people don't really have much of anything in common. They're so different in their lives. Their circumstances are worlds apart. Even the way that they come to the Christian faith and the way that they come to believe in Jesus Christ is extremely different in every case.

But the common factors here, and there are extremely important common factors, are that the Christian message itself, the gospel that they hear, this message of Jesus Christ, and also this one church that they then all become members of, this one community where Lydia, the slave girl, and the jailer are accepted as equals, as equal in value to their maker, as brothers and sisters. And the gospel message that they hear is the same. And Jesus Christ himself, the one to whom they come, is the same. Jesus Christ can bring three people who had nothing in common ethnically, nationally, socially, psychologically, and he could unite these people in faith and in hope and in love. So, we come back to what we asked at the beginning. What do you have in common as a church? What do you have in common as a congregation, as people who are about to sit together at the Lord's Supper, as you break bread and drink wine together? And the answer to that question, what do you have in common is everything? Because you have one Lord, Jesus Christ, and that Lord has one gospel, and he invites you together to one table. Amen. Let's pray briefly together.