

Text: Acts 16: 6-15
Title: Following the Flow
Date: 05.22.22
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Every endurance athlete, surfer, skier or snowboarder that I know is trying to find flow. They're endlessly searching for and chasing after flow....

One might ask, "What's flow?"

Steve Kotler, in West of Jesus: Surfing, Science, and the Origins of Belief, defines flow as "moments of rapt attention and total absorption where action and awareness merge, the sense of self vanishes, the passing of time changes, we're free from monkey-mind (inner chatter), and we have the sense of being in-sync with nature."

Flow happens in all sorts of other endeavors, but I know it through outdoor physical pursuits where there is an experience of body and creation being one – being in flow together.

Research scientists can point to the release of certain neuro-chemicals and the activation of particular brain circuits when individuals are in a state of flow. And, I can bear witness that flow is addictive. It doesn't happen often, and it happens less as you age or when you're injured, but the pursuit remains. You still seek after flow.

Now. This may sound like new-agey-touchy-feely-surfing-lore, but I know that there is something to being in flow, to being in-sync with body and creation. I'd venture that there's something spiritual at play.

In our text this morning Paul seems to be in flow with the Spirit. Paul credits what happens to the activity of the Spirit. He's following the flow. Consider....

Paul is convinced that he's called to share the good news of Jesus Christ beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and culture, so he travels to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. We pick-up reading where Paul confesses that....

He tried to go to Asia, but the Spirit blocked the way.

He tried to cross the border into Turkey, but the Spirit blocked the way.

Then the vision of a man from Macedonia sets his itinerary, and the Spirit makes a way.

He follows that flow.

There's no indication how the Spirit blocked their travel – broken wagon wheel, bad weather, or some internal trepidation – but the Spirit guided them here and not there, one way and not the other. And without record of wringing hands or angst filled spirits, Paul sets sail for Philippi in Macedonia. His journey coalesces with the wind of the Spirit and he sails in 2 days what later takes 5. He's in the windy-will-of-God and he lands in what is modern day Greece. The Spirit leads all the way to the European continent.

How do we know when we're in sync with the Spirit?

Life is hard. How do we know when a barrier is sign of God's will?

Should we assume that when things go our way that we're in the Spirit?
How do we know when we're in the flow of the Spirit?

The Christian Reformed Church has a spotty record at church planting. Massive resources were poured into church planting efforts in the 80s and 90s and many, or most, of those efforts eventually petered out. In our efforts to reach beyond ethnicity and culture there are few examples of success. I'm a failed church planter; I know something about the difficulties....

But over time I've noticed a shift in language. You now hear denominational executives talking about identifying where the Spirit is already blowing and then coming alongside to join in that movement. We're less inclined to parachute into a community to plant a church – believing that the Spirit will lead the way. Now we try to find and follow the wind. Consequently the Christian Reformed Church is not planting as many churches as it used to but recently welcomed 25 new congregations from Venezuela with this approach.....

Is that following the flow of the Spirit?

When Paul arrived in Philippi there were only a few Jews, so there was no temple. According to Jewish law a temple required 10 men – the heads of 10 families. Without 10-families-and-a-temple the people went down to the river to pray. Not unlike singing by the rivers of Babylon, a displaced people in a foreign land gathered to pray. Therefore, Paul talks to the gathered women and Lydia, a god-fearing Gentile, hears, makes room for Jesus, and invites Paul and his companions to stay with her.

The Spirit blows Paul to Philippi.

The Spirit opens Lydia's heart to Paul's word.

The Spirit flows until a Gentile woman is offering hospitality to a Jewish man.

Dear friends, what are we to make of all this?

Willie Jennings writes about Paul's journey:

This is a love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world and drive a question into their lives: Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?

The testimony of scripture is that the Holy Spirit is active. It's not just that God will one day reclaim creation unto *shalom*, but somehow God's Spirit is directing, driving, and making a way, even in Philippi, even today. The Holy Spirit flows out and love-unleashed pushes beyond the boundaries.

And as that's true, when we reach toward others in love are we in the flow of the Spirit? When we move beyond the boundaries to love others, are we in the Spirit? Is it that simple?

John Calvin writes,

To Christians the Spirit of the Lord is not a turbulent phantom, which they themselves have produced by dreaming, or received ready made by others; but they religiously seek the knowledge of him from scripture...

I like that phrase, “a turbulent phantom.” It captures the notion that the Spirit is not blowing about as a mystery – hither and thither – and our task to catch it. We not left chasing after an elusive mystery, but rather than “a turbulent phantom,” the movement of the Spirit is detailed in scripture.

So, while I don’t know if the Spirit leads to this career, or to that spouse, to this vacation home or to that parking spot, it seems to me that according to the witness of scripture....

when we love friend and enemy, we’re in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love Jew and Gentile, we’re in the flow of the Spirit.

When we love Christian and Muslim, we’re in the flow.

When we love gay and straight, we’re in the flow.

When we love family and foreigner, we’re in the flow of the Spirit.

That’s not to deny the Spirit’s leading in a variety of other ways. That’s not to deny some feeling. That’s not to deny devotional practices that might make us more in tune with God’s more particular will. And, neither is that to suggest that the flow of the Spirit is easy.

Following the wind of the Spirit does not equate to our good fortune. Quite frankly, Paul was following the Spirit and he ended beat-up, jailed-up, shipwrecked, and eventually killed. To be in the flow of the Spirit doesn’t mean easy sailing on smooth waters with the wind at our backs.

So how do we know when we’re in the Spirit?

It seems clear that the Spirit would not push or pull contrary to the purpose of Christ – the embodiment of love. And I’m not sure the purpose of the Spirit in our text is setting an itinerary but rather the proclamation of the gospel.

That’s to say that the Spirit points toward Christ. The Spirit directs us toward the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The flow of the Spirit is toward the good news that you’re loved, forgiven, and made right with God in Christ. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends, I get the longing for spiritual flow – to be so attuned to the will of God that we know when he’s blocking this way and opening that way. Faith is, in part, the desire to be so connected to God that our bodies, spirits, and intentions are in-sync with God’s. I don’t know how we always know when that’s happening but I get the longing....

And in a moment, when we ordain and install new elders and deacons, our prayer will be same. They are uniquely called and gifted and it is our prayer that they will be in flow with the purpose, path, and proclamation of Jesus. It is our prayer that they will be in the Spirit that we might love others, proclaim the good news, and point all toward Christ.

May they have the wisdom and courage to help us follow where the Spirit leads.
May they lead us in following that flow. Thanks be to God. Amen.