

Sometimes it is hard to place where people are from and where home is for them. Giannis Antetokounmpo, who plays basketball for the NBA's Milwaukee Bucks, is a case in point. Antetokounmpo's nickname is the "Greek Freak." Most folks would agree that a nickname might be helpful for him: his last name is a bit of a tongue twister. The first word in his nickname is because he was born in Athens and spent most of his life in Greece. Antetokounmpo's parents were Nigerians who came to Greece in 1991 seeking work to support their family. His father, who died in 2017 from a heart attack, was a handyman and his mother was a babysitter. They were the only black family who lived in their area.

The second word of Antetokounmpo's nickname is easier to explain: he is a freak of nature. At 6 feet 11 inches tall, he has the power of a center and the speed and ball-handling skills of a guard. Some people consider him to be the best basketball player in the world right now. But since he is only 24, if people doubt that he is the world's greatest basketball player, they may not for long. His star is rising fast.

While Antetokounmpo is a Greek citizen and likes his "Greek Freak" nickname, he views himself not as a Greek but as a Nigerian, even though he's never been to Nigeria. Even though he was raised in Greece, he grew up in a Nigerian family with Nigerian values. Hakeem Olajuwon, the former center for the Houston Rockets, says, "I know from his name that we are from the same tribe, the Yoruba tribe. His last name, which in Yoruba is spelled Adetokunbo, means 'the crown has returned from overseas.'"

Lydia, who is a prominent figure in today's First Reading, has a few things in common with Antetokounmpo. For one thing, she comes across as a sort of royalty from across the seas, being from Thyatira, which was in Asia Minor, or modern-day Turkey. This means that Lydia was from the continent of Asia, as Antetokounmpo's roots are from another continent, Africa. Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, which was very expensive to make in those days, and was worn mainly by royalty and the extremely wealthy. Yet another thing Lydia has in common with Antetokounmpo is that she lived in Philippi, which is in Greece. This meant that even though Lydia in Philippi was less than 400 miles from her home on the Asian continent, she was now living in Europe.

Our theme for today is multicultural and very international. As Paul sailed from Troas to Samothrace to Neapolis and to Philippi, he was sailing from Asia to Europe. This apparently occurred in the fall of the year 49. The church in Philippi became the first church in Europe, which Paul and Timothy, along with perhaps Silas and Luke as well, planted. Today's First Reading tells us that this church began when Paul and his friends met with a group of women by a river. God opened Lydia's heart to Paul's preaching, so Lydia and her entire household were baptized. Then Lydia opened her home, inviting the missionaries to stay with her.

Isn't it interesting how things work out? Paul had a vision in which a man from Macedonia asked for help, and yet Paul ended up interacting with a group of women instead. Earlier, Paul and his colleagues had wanted to go into two other areas, but in each case the Holy Spirit blocked their efforts. Life is so often like that: we have one thing in mind to do, but for whatever reason, we end up doing something other than what we had planned. Part of the message of scripture is that we need to be able to adapt, to roll with things. It's good to have a plan, but it's important not to become so locked into it that we close ourselves off from other opportunities for service that may come our way.

Twelve years ago, I was riding in a car with Pastors Bud and Amy Onstad, who were assistants to the former bishop of our Southeastern Synod. I was telling them about what had happened to the pastor of a church in Tupelo where I had worked as his associate - how he had been called to become the bishop of the Diocese of Virginia in the Episcopal Church. This event had turned the life of that parish upside down. I had been the priest-in-charge in that parish the summer before when their pastor was on sabbatical. Now I was back to being the priest-in-charge again as they were beginning a search process for a new pastor. Pastor Bud Onstad said, "And more than likely, a parish in our synod that we don't even know about yet will be going through the same thing in a few weeks when we elect a new bishop."

Twelve years ago, the new bishop we were about to elect turned out to be Pastor Julian Gordy: the parish that would be thrown into a tizzy, at least temporarily, was St. Andrew. Of course with St. Andrew being St. Andrew, you weathered that transition very well, with faith and courage. You continued moving forward into your new building project. The fruits of those labors you are sitting in right now. But next weekend, this probably

will happen again for another congregation in our synod as we elect a new bishop. Like St. Andrew, immediately it will be thrown into transition.

Undoubtedly, the members of that congregation will feel a mixture of emotions. Some of them may feel angry that the synod “stole” their pastor away from them. Others may feel pride: hey, our pastor must be a really good one, or else this wouldn’t have happened. Others, too, may feel a sense of happiness and sadness intermingled. When we experience a loss in our lives, grief is like that: it’s confusing and everyone has their own way of dealing with it. Certainly many of us who are fellow members with Bishop Gordy at St. Andrew will be grieving as he moves toward retirement, even while we give thanks for his service. But in the midst of our grief, both our synod and the congregation who loses its pastor and gains a new bishop will move forward led by the Holy Spirit. This is what happened as Paul and his team were led by the Spirit to establish the church in Europe. The church always moves on to face its future with faith and courage. We do this because we trust Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel: because the Holy Spirit “will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

Sometimes our biggest failures are because our dreams are too small. Perhaps this was the reason the Holy Spirit twice blocked Paul’s attempts to stay in Asia Minor and expand the church’s outreach there. Instead, the church, led by the Spirit, ended up going west into Europe. As you know, two thousand years ago, travel was very slow and laborious. Yet only twenty to twenty-five years after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension, the church had spread to a second, and perhaps even a third or a fourth continent. Already the church had struggled with and answered the question of how open it would be to the Gentile world. The message of the gospel had been opened to people who were not Jewish, and God opened Lydia’s heart to Paul’s message. That message actually was in the Hebrew Scriptures many centuries before the time of the church.

This proclamation is sounded forth loudly and clearly in today’s psalm: “Let your ways be known upon earth, your saving health among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God: let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide all the nations on earth.” The message is clear and unmistakable: God is present with everyone everywhere.

This same message is expressed in the next to the last chapter of the Bible near the end of the book of Revelation. By this time, the Romans' destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple was in the rear view mirror: it was history. Yet John assures us this is nothing to worry about. He envisions a new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. There will be no need for a temple, because the city will be filled with the presence of God. The city will be open to all the nations: "Its gates will never be shut by day." We continue to look for and long for that day.

Perhaps you have heard of Betty Rendon. Betty was a principal in a school in the country of Colombia whose life was threatened during the civil war there fifteen years ago. She and her family came to the United States and sought asylum, which was denied. Betty graduated from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago six years ago. Since she does not have legal status in the United States, she is unable to be called as a pastor. However the bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod appointed her to serve part-time at Emaus Lutheran Church in Racine, Wisconsin.

Earlier this month, Betty and her husband Carlos were arrested by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, or ICE. In spite of their spotless criminal records after having lived here for fifteen years, plus 65 letters signed by over 15,000 people supporting them, Betty and Carlos are to be deported to Colombia this week. Please remember them and their family in your prayers. Their daughter and granddaughter remain in the United States but will not be able to visit them.

Today's readings promise that God will make a home with us and with all people. That promise of Christ's presence holds us today. In the midst of all of life's heartaches and troubles, we remember that God is always with us.