



Der Anfang der Kirche: Ein offenes Herz

**Predigt am 10. März 2025 zur Eröffnung der
GEKE Regionaltagung / CPCE Regional Group**

Dear Sisters and Brothers!

Our Protestant churches have very different origins. Some – especially in the north – emerged when entire countries transitioned to the Reformation. Here in Germany, we still have a large and colorful patchwork of church confessions. It was the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 that allowed dukes to decide which confession they and their people would belong to. This is why, to this day, there are predominantly Catholic and predominantly Protestant regions – besides many people who nowadays do not belong to any church. Most of the churches in our regional group are small minority communities in their respective countries. Many came into existence because a particular ethnic group embraced the Reformation. Some churches were founded because missionaries from other countries came and inspired people.

The stories are different. But something is always at the beginning of a church: there are people who are inspired and who simply start. People who hear about faith in Jesus Christ and then take action, gathering a community. The great political decisions usually come much later.

I recently attended a service for the 150th anniversary of one of our congregations in Upper Bavaria. For us in Upper Bavaria, that is quite old. Our region was almost exclusively Catholic until the 19th century. But in this mountain resort town, the

newly built railway at that time brought many vacationers from Protestant regions. Some of them did not wait for a pastor, nor did they initially concern themselves with building a church. They simply gathered, sang, prayed, and read the Holy Scriptures together. Today, there is a large Lutheran church there, and the congregation grew over decades to more than 6,000 members (though that was quite some time ago...). But it all began because people simply started. To pray. To sing. To listen.

When we discuss the future of the church today, we should always remember this. The church grows where people simply start. It is people who hear God's call and whose hearts are opened by Him. They are the workers in the vineyard; through them, the church begins and continues to live. Then and now.

I want to read from the Acts of the Apostles about a moment when someone simply started. This story takes us back to the very beginning of the church – 2,000 years ago. But it is not really about history; it is about beginning. About how God's Spirit keeps changing people and making the world a better place.

Acts 16

During the night, Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia stood before him and pleaded, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" After Paul had seen the vision, we immediately looked for a way to go to Macedonia, convinced that God had called us to proclaim the Good News there.

We set sail from Troas and made a straight course to Samothrace; the next day, we arrived in Neapolis. From there, we traveled to Philippi, a leading city in Macedonia and a Roman colony, where we stayed for several days.

On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river, where we thought there would be a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there. Among them was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who worshipped the God of Israel. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

She and her household were baptized, and she invited us: "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

There is so much in this story that can encourage and strengthen us today. This is the first known person in Europe to be baptized. The first baptism in Europe. The beginning of Christianity on this continent. And the first person is Lydia – a

woman, a merchant, confident and independent. She deals in expensive fabrics, in purple, the color of kings. We can assume that she was financially independent. God opens her heart, and she listens attentively to Paul. What a powerful scene. A devout Jewish woman comes to pray – not in a building but by a river, where things flow and move. She allows herself to be touched by God and opens her heart. She listens and then opens her home to the strangers. This is how Christianity in Europe begins. Nothing more and nothing less. An open heart.

The story becomes even more powerful when we consider what happened before Paul's vision. The previous chapter is filled with disputes. The apostles and missionaries argue fiercely, as the Bible says. First, there is a conflict between Paul and Peter about whether one must first become Jewish to be Christian or if Gentiles can be baptized directly. Peter insists on Jewish tradition, while Paul advocates for openness. After much debate, they compromise: one will do one thing, and the other will do another. Paul seems to have won and sets off with his group. But even within his group, tensions arise. They cannot agree on who should accompany them, and voices are raised.

Then, after all this arguing, Paul has a vision at night and hears the call to Macedonia. They are still in Asia Minor, on the Turkish side of the Mediterranean, but now they set sail for Macedonia, the region that is now northern Greece. They cross the sea and meet a woman who is completely different from the quarreling apostles. While the missionaries dig into their positions, Lydia appears by the river, surrounded by royal purple, devout and believing, yet open to something new. She listens, and God opens her heart. This is the attitude with which the church begins. This is how the Gospel reaches the world, and this is how humanity becomes real. An open heart instead of stubbornness and strife.

(This is a small story that tells us something great about our Christian faith and about Europe. It speaks of a spiritual attitude. But also a political one. The route Paul and his companions took across the sea is almost exactly the same as that of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan coming to Europe today. From the Turkish coast to the island of Lesbos and onward to the Greek mainland. I worked for many years in refugee camps in the Middle East for my church. Many people there told me about their dream of finally living a safe life. For many, this dream is called Europe. A Christian family in northern Iraq, with three children, fleeing from terror and living in a container, once told me they were looking forward to Germany because it was a Christian country. A year later, their names appeared on a list of

those who drowned off the Turkish coast. They did not experience an open heart; they perished against the walls of Fortress Europe. They are not to blame for the many problems our country and our world are facing. They are the ones suffering the most. Never forget that.)

We are the church because God calls us, as He called Paul in the night, and because God opens our hearts, as He did with Lydia at the river. Where is God calling us today? That question always brings us back to the beginning of the church, where the Spirit moves and where we find our mission as Christians. Where is God calling us today? And what moves our hearts?

I hope that in our journey together as the CPCE regional group for Southeastern Europe, we will share with each other what moves us – the stories of people who open their hearts, where people simply begin again and build Christian community.

That is why it is so important to remember the beginning – the beginning of a congregation when a few committed people simply started. And the beginning of Christianity in Europe when a woman came to a river, God opened her heart, and she simply listened. This attitude is the way forward for a Christian community. Let yourselves be called, listen, and open your hearts.

Amen.