



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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7th Sunday of Easter

May 8, 2016

“Lydia—Seller of Purple Goods”

(Acts 16:13-15)

Rev. David K. Groth

“And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ And she prevailed upon us” (Acts 16:13-15).

COLLECT: O King of glory, Lord of hosts, uplifted in triumph far above all heavens, leave us not without consolation but send us the Spirit of truth whom You promised from the Father; for You live and reign with Him and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

There were a lot of zigs and zags in Paul's life, and here comes another big one. In a vision, Paul sees a man from Macedonia urging him, "Come to Macedonia and help us." Macedonia is what we know of today as Greece, a part of Europe. This is a big deal actually: this is new territory, a new continent for the Lord's church. As far as we know, there's not yet a Christian to be found in all Europe.

They go to Philippi first, an important city of Macedonia. It was a Roman colony, a little bit of Rome planted in a distant margin of the Empire.

Of course, in Philippi the first thing Paul does is ask where the local synagogue is. He likes to take the Gospel first to Jewish people, to those who already believe the Old Testament scriptures. It appears, however, that Philippi doesn't have enough Jewish folks to warrant a synagogue. You only need a minimum of ten Jewish men, but there weren't ten to be found. There's just this little group of women who, for lack of a synagogue meet regularly by the riverside and use it as a place to pray their Hebrew prayers. It's a very small audience for Paul, but you have to start somewhere.

One of the women is named Lydia. The text says she's from Thyatira and is a seller of purple goods. The purple dye came from a certain shell fish, and for unknown reasons, the waters at Thyatira produced the brightest and the most permanent hues of purple. Cheaper grades of dye were produced by crushing the shell-fish, but in Thyratira it was traditionally extracted one drop at a time. Because it was very rare, it was also very expensive. The only ones who wore purple were the wealthy and powerful. Rich Romans would flaunt their wealth not with designer handbags and cars, but by trimming their white togas with purple margins.

Lydia comes from Thyatira, but is living in Philippi, and selling these purple goods to the Roman citizens there. So Lydia is a business woman, capable, successful, rich, which is really quite remarkable because it was not an era known for female entrepreneurs. We know she has a house, large enough to accommodate Paul and his companions: Luke, Timothy and Silas.

What else? Lydia's native city was devoted to the sun god called Tyrinnas, but somewhere along the way Lydia shook that off and worshiped the God of Abraham. When Paul begins teaching and proclaiming the Gospel, the culmination and completion of the Old Testament scriptures, the text says, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying."

That's how it always works. People can only believe when God opens the heart for them. Faith is not a decision we make. It's a gift of God through the Word of God. It may feel like a decision, but the Bible is absolutely clear. "No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit'" (1 Cor. 12:3). Another way of thinking of that is if you have faith, you know the Holy Spirit is working in you. For until God opens the heart the sinful mind will be hostile to God (Rom. 8:7). Until God opens the heart, all this stuff is foolishness to us and we cannot understand it because it is spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14). Until God opens the heart, we will be enemies of God (Rom. 5:10), and will resist the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51). Though faith may feel like a decision, it is, in fact, a gift. Romans 10: "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of the Lord" (v. 17).

In Lydia we have a beautiful example of adult conversion. There is no dramatic emotionalism here, no carefully choreographed music to work the audience up into a lather. Lydia isn't agitated or shouting or even praying. What she's doing is quietly paying attention to the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and by the Holy Spirit she recognizes it as the pearl of great price.

With that, Lydia is the first recorded Christian in Europe. Grand cathedrals would be built in time, and most

of us descend from European Christians, but Lydia was the first. It all had a quiet start with Paul speaking with a few women next to the river in Philippi. Even with big projects, you have to start somewhere, and Paul does not despise even the smallest audience.

I hope you keep your antennas out for those small, humble opportunities. Like it or not, you too are his witnesses, and those opportunities come and go in a flash. But they are so important. Don't let them slip away. Realize, people who know you and trust you are much more likely to listen to you than they ever would listen to me. You may be their best chance in this culture of ever hearing the Gospel.

It doesn't need to be a big fuss. Some churches offer huge productions with convincing props and professional lighting and sound, angels flying through the air on nearly invisible tethers, bus loads of senior citizens and school children being shuffled through the gift shop afterwards . . . That can all be well and good and impressive. It has a certain "wow!" factor. But I think where it's really at is one person at a time, the old fashioned way, quiet, private conversation between two or three people. Most of the time you simply listen with humility and respect, but there comes a time when you boldly share the hope you have in Christ, sincerely and winsomely. You don't have to try to argue anyone into the faith. Just tell your story, how trusting in Jesus brings you great peace. That's where it's at, one person at a time.

Lydia is soon baptized and she takes the message of Jesus back to her own household, and her whole household was also baptized. We don't know who that includes or their ages. The Bible is never interested in giving the ages of those who were baptized. Apparently it doesn't matter. The gifts given in baptism do not depend on the maturity of the one being baptized, but on the grace of the one giving the gifts.

The next thing Lydia does is offer the hospitality of her home to Paul and his three companions. Maybe she

noticed their accommodations in Philippi were poor or overpriced. In any case it seems as if Paul at first declines; he doesn't want to impose. Lydia rephrases the invitation. "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." How could anyone refuse that? They've just been outmaneuvered. "She prevailed upon us" Luke writes, and you can almost see the smile on his face.

Lydia is a strong woman, and there's lots of room in the Lord's church for strong women, even as there was lots of room in Lydia's heart and home for the Lord's church. Her house there in Philippi likely became a gathering place for the believers. It likely became a house church.

By the way, wherever there is persecution, there are house churches, where the shades are drawn and the hymns sung quietly. From ancient Rome to present day countries like North Korea, house churches are so important.

There's a growing house church movement in America, not because of persecution, but as a reaction against the institutional church. The house church sounds quaint, somehow authentic, but it faces the same troubles as any other church. It can become inward focused and exclusive, "us four and no more." It can have little or no impact on the community, the poor, those in prisons, those in need. House churches can fail to evangelize. They can fail to serve. They fail to be generous. They can become dull or contentious places. Often they overlook Holy Baptism, Lord's Supper, and Confession and Absolution, all of which were instituted not by the institutional church but by Jesus. They can go adrift theologically. But again, where there is persecution, where the church has to fly under the radar, house churches are so important.

Lydia's home likely became the initial gathering place for believers in Philippi. Romans 12 says one of the marks of a Christian is hospitality. So maybe you can use your home in service of God. Maybe you can start and host a small group Bible Study. (We can help you with that.) Perhaps you can turn it into a place where hospitality is extended not just to friends and family, (to those who can

return the favor), but to those who cannot . . . to the troubled nephew whose parents don't give him the love and attention he needs, to the lonely widow, to the international students from the University. How can you use your home? How can God use your home?

Finally, add Lydia's name to that long list of women in the Bible who were so important and instrumental. Add Lydia's name to that list of women who were instrumental in your life, especially the one who carried you to the font where the water of life was splashed on your head . . . the one who dandled you on her knee and taught you to sing "Jesus Loves me This I Know." The one who ignored your tantrums and nearly dragged you into the church . . . the one who patiently bore the insult of your rolling eyes and loved you through adolescence . . . Find a way to thank her today.

And thank God also for Lydia (the first European Christian), a strong woman who offered hospitality to God's Word and to God's Church.

As with Lydia, so with you. The Lord has opened your heart. You've been baptized. With Lydia, you too can confess Jesus is Lord which must mean the Holy Spirit is active in your life. Therefore, with everything you have thank the one who has redeemed and saved you. Thank the one whom soldiers clothed in a fine garment made of royal purple. (Could it have come from Lydia's workshop in Thyatira?) They pressed a crown on his head and bowed before him and mocked him and beat him and then escorted him to his throne and placed a sign above head that read "the king of the Jews". There our King served us. There our King fought the battle himself. There our King, though he died, won the victory for us. So praise him, you his people, and thank him with everything you have, hearts, hands, voices, and perhaps even with your home. Amen

