

“Lydia”

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park
First United Methodist Church of Oak Park
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During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, he immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16: 9-15)

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. (John 14:23-29)

Little is known about her. But what a remarkable woman! As our first lesson today, we have an amazing story about an amazing woman, so appropriate to the occasion today, when we honor our mothers, and when we welcome new members on our journey of faith. Her name was Lydia. In our first lesson, two verses are allocated to her for us to get to know her. Not very many, I acknowledge. But when I think of the countless women that are nameless and faceless in the Bible, as well as in history in general, I would say that two verses, it ain't that bad! On the contrary, I think we should applaud Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, for his good effort to record her name and write her story!

Shall we now meet Lydia? In verse 16, we read: “A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in

purple cloth.” Was she single? Was she married? Did she have children? We do not know. If she was married, we can’t find her husband’s name anywhere in the story. In our story, Lydia does not depend on a man, husband or father or son, to confer her status. Whether married or not, Lydia was an independent woman.

What we also know about Lydia from this verse is that she was “*a worshiper of God*” on the one hand, and “*a dealer of purple cloth*” on the other. Let us consider the second piece of information first. Lydia was “*a dealer of purple cloth.*” Lydia had a job, or a business, of her own! This certainly is not something unusual these days in this part of the world, but it was some two thousand years ago in a deeply patriarchal world! Moreover, we have enough reason to believe that Lydia was very successful in her profession. In the Roman world, purple cloth was for the rich and the royal, not for main street. It is safe to infer that Lydia, the dealer of purple cloth, was a businesswoman of no small stature, enjoying a comfortable income as well as status.

This exceptionally successful and exceptionally independent woman was also a “*Worshiper of God.*” I don’t know if you remember it or not, but in previous chapters of the same book, Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, was described as a “*God-fearing man.*” (Act 10:22) “*Fearer of God*” or “*Worshiper of God*” is a term Luke uses to refer to a Gentile, a non-Jew, who is attracted to Judaism. He or she may not be ready to make the full commitment of conversion, but a fearer or a worshiper of God in Luke’s narrative is a seeker or a sympathizer of the Jewish life of faith with some connection or attachment to a synagogue. And that is who Lydia was -- a Gentile seeker and sympathizer.

Yet, in Philippi, where Lydia lived, it seems that there was no synagogue, no strong Jewish population. In our story, we find Lydia and other women gathered by the river, outside the gate of the city. We do not know whether they were meeting in the open air or in a makeshift synagogue. But on that day, by that river, a chance encounter occurred. It happened that Paul and his companions were in town. It happened that looking for a place of prayer, they, too, came to the riverside. I just said “a chance encounter,” but below the surface, it was an encounter that was meant to happen. It was an encounter toward which the Spirit had been working on both sides.

Before coming to Philippi, Paul was in Troas in a land we now call Turkey. His plan was to travel westward to the region of Asia. Yet, in a vision, Paul saw a man calling him to the other side of the Aegean Sea, to Macedonia. Paul listened. And Paul complied. Leaving behind the familiar territory, Paul and his companions sailed into uncharted waters. And this is how the mission to Europe began. There, in Philippi, they met Lydia, the first European convert, whose longing heart was met and opened by the gracious impulse of the living God. What happened on that riverbank on that day was not just a chance encounter between Paul and Lydia, but a convergence of divine guidance and human longing.

When God opened her heart, Lydia immediately opened her home. Listen what Lydia says in verse 15 after her baptism: “*If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.*” God opened her heart, and she listened eagerly to what was said by Paul. Listening, she was baptized, not alone, but bringing her entire household

with her. Being baptized, she opened her home and turned it into a spiritual base for the entire city. The first church in Europe was born on that day, when Lydia opened her home in response to God's opening her heart.

What a remarkable woman! What a blessed woman! We do not know whether she had children or not, but Lydia was a mother. She mothered the church in Philippi. With her humble, welcoming, open, generous, and hospitable spirit, she modeled female spirituality and leadership. With a mother's heart, she brought new life and energy to the church's mission and ministry.

Praise God we have many Lydias among us. They are young and old, single and married, male and female. With their hearts wide open, humbly and expectantly, they listen to God's word. And listening, they trust. And trusting, they put their faith into action. In love and service of God and others, they give their time, talent, and treasure, so freely and so faithfully.

Let us keep it going! Let us continue to walk in Lydia's footsteps! Let us walk with her to the riverbank! Let us walk with her to her home church! Together, as a community of faith, let us walk and worship, love and serve, with glad and generous hearts! God's grace stands ready to come to meet us and make her home with us (John 14:23). Thanks be to God!