

If You Have Judged Me...
The United Church of Broomfield
May 26, 2019

Acts 16:6-15 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 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, we 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 worshipper 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.

There are some powerful women (and portrayals of women) in the Bible as we recently learned during our Lenten book study. From Eve, Martha and Mary, and the Canaanite Woman, the scriptures are not hesitant to let us know that the story of God is not entirely written by the male species. In the sixteenth chapter of Acts we are introduced to yet another strong woman, but one who has, shall we say, sort of fallen through the cracks.

If asked to name women whose stories are told in scripture, you might think of Rebekah or Rachel in the Old Testament, maybe even Deborah or Esther. In the New Testament, Mary of Bethany or Mary Magdalene might come to mind. But Lydia? Lydia is not that well-known.

Even the biblical commentaries – those sometimes massive books used by preachers, theologians and scholars that seek to interpret and describe what the Bible has to say – they don't seem to think enough of her to devote much space to her story. And that's a shame.

The story of this woman in The Acts of the Apostles, who is identified as Lydia of Thyatira, deserves the kind of attention that requires microscopic dissection and careful

thought and discernment. But go find her in the biblical commentaries. Go ahead. Mention is made of her, obviously. No way to get around it. Conjecture is offered as to what kind of woman she was. But she isn't, in my opinion, the subject of much space or thought. Not really. So, I'm going to try to give Lydia her due, even if just a little.

As I mentioned, she is from Thyatira, a city in Asia Minor famous for its textile industry. Because this industry deals primarily with only the finest linens, purchased by the wealthy and important, the city itself is wealthy... as is Lydia. When we are introduced to her, we find that she has relocated to Philippi, in Macedonia. Business has been good, but she decides to take it to a place where it might get even better. When you are in business, you go where the business takes you.

She is dressed in her own product, the finest of purple linen. It is the kind of fabric favored by royalty and people of means. Only the best will do for those who are Lydia's customers, and since she caters to such folk, she dresses like them as well. A woman of means herself, she likely wears fine jewelry, makes use of the most expensive make-up, and her hair is smartly done. She has learned how to take advantage of her station in life. She knows what she's doing, and when you cater to the well-to-do you better dress the part.

It's easier to see Lydia as a savvy, self-sufficient business woman who carries herself with confidence. You know the type, don't you? In a male-dominated world, she moves with authority, an authority granted by her position as a successful business owner. She is as comfortable in a boardroom, with her attaché by her side, as she is in the trendiest of Philippian boutiques.

Yet – and this is important for us to know – this does not define Lydia of Thyatira. What defines her cannot be seen with the naked eye. There is an inward quality that emerges only as one engages her in conversation, looks deeply into her eyes, listens to the pleadings of her heart.

Luke, the author who introduces us to Lydia, tells us first that she is a God-fearer; for Gentiles it means a worshiper of God. Then, he tells us she is a searcher, one who listens eagerly to what Paul has to say when he addresses her worship group that has gathered down by the river. **Then**, Luke informs us she is from Thyatira. Her profession is not the first and most important descriptor of Lydia. It is important to Luke that we know who Lydia is and what kind of woman she is, and that she is not defined by what she does. Her personal worth has nothing to do with her profession or her wealth.

We are told that she is a woman of faith who listens.

It's amazing what listening will do for you. It often positions you to be in the place and time in which God is speaking. And sometimes you find God speaking in very specific terms. That is what we discover in this portion of Luke's story.

It begins with a vision. To Luke, “it is a sure sign that God’s impulse is being felt.”¹ In this vision, the Apostle Paul is told to redirect his evangelistic ministry. He had been planning to travel to the familiar region of Asia controlled by the Romans. But every time he takes up his travel itinerary, the door closes. He’s like a man in a maze, constantly running into dead-ends. But now, there is a man in a dream pleading with him to bring the gospel to Macedonia, in Europe.

Paul is a pretty good listener too, especially when it comes to the voice of God, and he doesn’t hesitate to do what he is told. The first city he and his traveling troupe enter in Macedonia is Philippi. The next Sabbath, they go down to the riverside where they have heard there is a group gathered for worship and prayer. And that is where and when they encounter Lydia. By listening to the gospel story, as Paul presents it, Lydia’s faith discovers an entirely new dimension. She is introduced to Christ and life will never again be the same; largely because Lydia is a listener.

Maybe that is why Jesus was so enamored of children. You know the story. Some children try to get close to Jesus, and when his disciples shoo them away Jesus chides them. He invites the little ones to come and be with him, to be blessed by him, explaining to everyone gathered that you have to be like a child before you can enter the kingdom of heaven. This is one of those scripture passages, by the way, that has received a lot of attention in the commentaries. And we still can’t be sure exactly what Jesus means.

But perhaps one thing Jesus has in mind is that a child is a listener. You might tend to doubt that when you observe children in church, but it is true. Children pick up on a lot more than we realize, even when it appears they don’t listen to anything. They’re like sponges, soaking it all in. Children are listeners, and Jesus took particular delight in those who heard – really heard – the message of the kingdom.

Lydia “was listening to us,” Luke says, and because she was such a good listener, “The Lord opened her heart...”

But I particularly like what Luke tells us next. “When she and her household were baptized...” Luke gives us the impression that it happened immediately. They didn’t schedule baptism for two weeks later. It was done right away.

Can you imagine?! In her finest purple linen! We’re not talking about cotton, but linen. Linen is a delicate fabric, easily damaged by water. You don’t wash linen with Tide and toss it in the dryer! Yet, this woman of means, of dignity... this self-sufficient CEO of her own company... throws all such caution to the wind, is baptized on the spot, emerges from the river dripping wet with her hair going in every which direction, and her purple

¹ Fred B. Craddock, et. al., *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1994), p. 254.

linen business suit completely ruined. But she doesn't care. "The Lord opened her heart," and that is all that mattered.

But the story gets even better. She looks at Paul and says, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."

She offers the hospitality of her home to Paul and his friends. She is humbled at the thought that this man of God might visit in her home. "If you have judged me to be faithful," she says. Not, "Come to my office and I can put you into contact with the movers and shakers of the city." Not, "You know, Paul, I rub elbows with some pretty important people around here, and I could introduce you to them." Not, "Let's do dinner sometime." She says with all humility and grace, "If you have judged me to be faithful."

Lydia, for all her fine garments and confidence and leadership ability, is humble in spirit, and out of this humility offers a heart of hospitality. To ask Paul and his friends to stay in her home is her way of asking God to do the same.

We didn't read it for our scripture reading today, but you need to know that Lydia is seen once again in an extension of this story. After verses 15, Paul and Silas get into a little trouble in Philippi. They are arrested and flogged, then thrown into a prison cell. After a midnight earthquake, followed by another conversion experience – this time of the jailer who was watching over them – they are released. The authorities tell them to leave Philippi immediately, but they don't do it; at least not right away. Before they leave the city, they go to Lydia's home. If there is one place in Philippi where they are welcome with open arms and an open heart, it is in Lydia's home.

They once again find refuge with this one who has opened her heart to the Lord. An open and hospitable heart is the only response that can be given to the grace which God gives us, so as you can imagine, the final, probing question is addressed to you and to me. Have we opened our hearts and our homes to the Lord? Doing so, as we have seen in the witness of Lydia, has nothing to do with money or means, power or position. God is willing and able to infiltrate the heart of anyone who is willing to listen for God's voice, and in humility invite God to come in.

These two small vignettes are the only time we read of Lydia in the New Testament. But later, Paul writes a letter to the church that is established there, possibly – no, probably – in her home. Not only does he show more affection for the Philippian church than any other he has served, but it reveals the church to be deeply committed to Christ, to Paul, and to his mission. I don't think that's an accident. I think it is a direct result of Lydia's hospitable heart. And, I believe, she teaches a lesson we all need to learn.

"If you have judged me to be faithful..." In your desire to be found faithful, invite God to enter in. In such humility you will find the grace that fills the human heart and leads to eternal life.

May God find our hearts open to her invading presence and when she enters, may she discover the kind of humility that mirrors the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ.² Amen.

² Dr. Randy L. Hyde. *If You Have Judged Me to be Faithful.*