

“Open Hearts”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 12, 2019

4th Sunday of Easter / Mother’s Day

Psalm 67

Rev. John Wahl

Acts 16:6-15

Today, as you know, is Mother’s Day, the 105th celebration year of its celebration on the 2nd Sunday of May as decreed by President Woodrow Wilson in 1914. It’s fair to say, then, that none of us have ever not celebrated Mother’s Day; and thus, at least for this one day each year, we celebrate, appreciate, and remember the nurture and sacrifice of those who brought us into life and other formative women we have known and loved.

For so many of us, it was women who introduced us to and taught us about the Christian faith: mothers and grandmothers, aunts and neighbors, deacons or Sunday School teachers. As we recall these many female influencers today, we think of their many different gifts: strength and tenderness, patience and perseverance. We can acknowledge that these women quite likely possessed a greater depth and range of qualities than we – in our younger, formative years – may have recognized.

In our scripture reading today, we encounter an amazing woman named Lydia; of whom a few things are revealed, but we can imagine even more. Through this encounter with Paul and his missionary companions, Lydia becomes the first Gentile follower of Jesus on the continent of Europe – a living symbol of the how the good news of the God’s love has been and continues to be shared in all corners of the earth.

Here, in Acts, chapter 16, we are reminded that the missionary movement is not shaped by some overarching strategic plan. Instead, it is much more organic; for while Paul and his companions are being led, at times the Spirit keeps them from preaching in certain places. As happened during Paul’s dramatic conversion story in chapter 9, his course is set by a vision that vetoes his strategic plan.¹

In this vision, Paul sees a Macedonian man beckoning to him, begging for his help – but exactly what kind of assistance he hoped for we are not told. Convinced by the vision that God had called them to preach good news there, without hesitation Paul and the others cross over into Europe and set out for this region of Macedonia.

They arrive in Philippi – the city named for the Greek king Philip – father of Alexander the Great. It was now a Roman colony with a Jewish population that was

¹ David Forney from *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

apparently too small to support a synagogue, so the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles would gather for prayer along the banks of a river outside the city gates.²

Once Paul and his companions reach Philippi, we learn that they remain “in this city for some days,” apparently waiting for the Sabbath day; as this is the way Paul typically meets new people to introduce the gospel. However, instead of meeting a man of Macedonia, Paul sits down to speak to the women gathered by the river.

As a “worshipper of God,” Lydia was a Gentile who was attracted to Judaism, but not yet ready or able to make the full commitment of conversion. As a “dealer in purple cloth” she was a businessperson who would have been accustomed to dealing with the elite in Philippi, those who could have afforded to purchase such an expensive material. She is not a native of Philippi, but has a residence there; and, after being baptized, invites – seemingly almost compels – Paul and the others to stay at her home.

These are the things we know, but based on them, there is much more that is suggested or implied. As there is no mention of a man in her household, we could assume that Lydia was both the breadwinner and decision-maker. This would have been a rare situation in the patriarchy of the era. Maybe she was a widow, maybe divorced, of those details we cannot be sure; but both in her having a home of her own, and in opening it in hospitality to the visiting strangers, Lydia displays her strength and her love.

Who was this woman making her way independently in a world run by men? Who was this Gentile who sought for the God of Judaism? She stands before us today as a kind of “narrative icon,” says Ronald Turner: “contemplative Mary and active Martha in one, her heart set on God even while she gets here work done.”³

“The Lord opened her heart,” we are told, “to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.” After Lydia and her household are baptized, she immediately welcomes into her home Paul and his companions who need place to stay. An open heart results in open doors.

Often, ministry is equated with those individuals and those things that are visible – the ministers, the choir and ushers, the sacraments. However, ministry is made possible by those who often are not seen and at times are not named. Despite our tendency to want to identify a personality, or even a hero, this story reminds us that it takes a team for ministry to be effective. Paul was not alone; he was there with Silas, Timothy and others, including whoever recounted this event. Lydia was not there alone but came to pray with her fellow God-worshippers who had found one other in a foreign city. All are co-laborers. The church is strengthened, then and now,

² Adam Hamilton, “The Call: The Life and Message of the Apostle Paul” p. 104

³ Ronald Cole-Turner from *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 2

by those who demonstrate their faithfulness in both their words and their deeds, and by those who both extend and accept generous hospitality. The proclamation of the good news of God’s love opens hearts, and “open hearts results in open doors.”⁴

From this initial encounter in the city of Philippi, in the region of Macedonia, will grow a church to which Paul will return and eventually pen a letter from prison, encouraging them to remain strong in their faith. Lydia will continue to be a leader in that congregation and for the other churches that are founded in the region, an early picture of what so many women have, in our own lives, accomplished in sharing and nurturing the Christian faith with so many.

The book of Acts is the story of the formation of the early church – led by the Holy Spirit and set in motion through these encounters between unlikely people in unexpected places. There is faith required to go and share the good news; there is also faith necessary to receive strangers into our midst and offer gracious hospitality. It seems, throughout Acts, that the story moves less by strategic planning and more by two themes that “pop up” again and again: where are people open to listening; and where are people suffering?⁵

Did Paul ever meet the “man of Macedonia” that he saw in his vision, the one begging him to cross over into a new land and lend help? Or was Lydia the person to whom the Spirit was guiding them all along? For, as her heart was opened to Paul’s words, we see a moment of interaction between human obedience and divine imagination. There, on the bank of the river, outside of the city gate, longing and grace meet: the longing heart of a godly woman is opened by the gracious impulse of a faith-giving God in a moment that – like the incarnation of Christ itself – is at once fully human and fully divine. And then, by hosting the missionaries in her home, Lydia becomes one of them; a new convert already engaged in the ministry of converting others. We can only imagine how many others will receive the kind of hospitality and help they need, and hear the good news of God’s love, while gathered at Lydia’s house.

Our faithful response involves listening for God to speak to us, but also trusting in those things that cannot or have not yet been seen. The people of this congregation and the wider church are faithful in so many ways: in worship and prayer, in service and fellowship, in the giving of time, talent and resources; in the lending of encouragement and support. At those times when we wonder whether or not God is still speaking to us even today, we might consider again these twin themes of Acts: Where are people open to listening? And where are people suffering and in need?

⁴ Jennifer Kaaland from *WorkingPreacher.com*

⁵ Eric Barreto from *WorkingPreacher.com*

As is revealed in this story, and re-affirmed in our own stories, it is often women who invite us to be co-laborers in this missionary enterprise of word and deed. Maybe you have been called or inspired to be a teacher, an encourager, a healer, an advocate for the environment, or a protector of justice. Maybe you will be the one to engage a stranger and offer them an invitation of hospitality; maybe instead you will be the one to enter a foreign territory and accept gracious hospitality from someone else. Are you called to feed the hungry or shelter the homeless or to befriend the lonely or to encourage learning? None of these responses are exclusive; rarely either are they part of a strategic plan; but all of them are open to us if our hearts are open to them.

As followers of Christ, co-laborers with others in the name of Christ, we are each called to faithful response. What new direction might God be sending us; what new word can be spoken to someone ready to listen; what need can be met of someone who is suffering? Today, at least if not only on this day, we give thanks for the many women who have shown us the way we might respond to these calls: with strength and tenderness, patience and perseverance, faith and love. AMEN.