

May 26 2019

Acts 16:9-15

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.

Poem read earlier in service:

The Summer Day, by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

SERMON

Do you know me? I am Lydia, worshipper of God, from the city of Thyatira, dealer in purple cloth. Luke, the one who wrote down these stories of the early days, he introduces me with those few lines. Let me read to you again what he wrote - *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.

Ah Luke, he tells you my name, tells you that I opened my home, but only gives a glimpse of what really happened to me. While those few lines may give clues about me, let me tell you more, for I have a story to tell...

Lydia, mine is a common Greek name, it right away tells you I am not of Jewish origin. No, I was born and raised in Thyatira, several days journey from here in Philippi, which is my home now. How I got here matters little, what's important is what happened that day, long ago, by the banks of the river.

But I get ahead of myself. I have always been a seeker, learning about the gods of different places, worshipping and finding meaning in study and community. That's what led me to spending time with those who worshipped the God of Israel, the Jews, as they call themselves. They spoke of one God, creator of all, the one who freed those in exile, who brought his followers to a land of milk and honey, this God who desired service over sacrifice. I was intrigued, and so came there frequently on the sabbath to hear their teachers speak. Back then it was a small group of Jews in Philippi - so few

that there weren't enough men for a synagogue within the city limits. That's why we met outside the city, near the river, making the rituals of purification easier to do. Being such a small group out there by the river made it possible for us women to hear the teachers, to learn from them.

And so it was that day long ago. The man, Paul, with some of his friends, had arrived in Philippi some days earlier. On the sabbath they came and sat with us. Sat with us women, and spoke to us. That tells you something, doesn't it? While Paul has never been shy to share his beliefs, willing to argue with anyone in defense of the Way, did you know that's what we called ourselves - followers of the Way? Well that first day he sat with us, women, teaching and sharing a message unlike any I'd heard before. Oh that Paul - could he speak! How he loved to debate! He was passionate, that one. He spoke of a Messiah, Jesus, the Christ. Now messiahs- that's nothing new for us. When I learned about this savior, this man who was both human, just like us, and divine - God's son here on earth, I was wary at first. These Roman rulers we have, they all think they're the son of God. Julius Caesar, emperor Augustus - they were proclaimed sons of God - and wow, let me tell you, that power leads to nothing good. As they see it, being a son of God means they get the best of everything, and the rest of us get the scraps. But as I watched these Jesus followers, right from the beginning I saw something different.

As I sat and listened to Paul, there by the river, the Lord opened my heart that first day. I learned of a servant king. Imagine that! A king who didn't seek power and domination, but one whose command was to love - to love everyone. Now that's revolutionary. And this love, this saving power, was not just for the Jews, but for all of us. This Jesus he spoke of taught his followers that we are all equal, we are all valuable and loved and we all have work to do in this Kingdom, here, now. Now that's radical! Paul showed up and started talking to us women that day because there weren't enough Jewish men in these parts but that didn't stop him. Paul recognized that us women are just as worthy of God's love and that we can help spread this message -

the message of a king who wants us all to be free, a king who was willing to die to share this message of love.

Paul was never interested in our social standing, or anyone's for that matter - no, to him if you weren't a follower of this man, Jesus, you were nothing. I had money then - I ran a household, rubbed shoulders with the rich and powerful, for those are the only ones who could afford my expensive purple cloth. Paul and his friends didn't care that I was not accompanied by a man. No, with some encouragement from me, they made my home the center of their ministry here in Philippi. Oh, those early days had Paul, Silas, Timothy and the others in and out, teaching preaching and always looking for a meal! But how I learned! That day when the Lord opened my heart to listen, that was just the beginning. I learned that to be a follower meant to provide hospitality - to open my home, my heart, my life, to all - Jews, Greeks, slaves and free, male and female - we lived, believing we are all equals here, all adopted sons and daughters of the living God.

And these followers - Paul, Peter, Barnabas, Silas, Timothy - all of them, they have their squabbles. They are fully human, after all. There is still plenty to be worked out, for those who follow the Way, but they, too, are willing to suffer for the Messiah. You see, to them, though he's not here with us in the flesh, he's *here* with us. The power of the Spirit is alive and strong. Why shortly after I met Paul, while he was still preaching and teaching here in Philippi, he was thrown into prison for chasing a demon out of a slave girl. And as he and Silas were praying and singing, in that gloomy dungeon, an earthquake shook that place to its foundations and they were free. But did they run off, thinking only of saving themselves? No, Paul, that rascal - always looking for an opportunity to preach - he taught that jailer about Christ. Right then and there. Miracles happened frequently in the early days- healing the lame, chasing evil spirits from harming folks or spreading lies, Peter even raised Tabitha from her death bed, and once Paul picked up a boy who had fallen out of a window when he fell asleep while listening to them talk, and brought him back to life! But they all make it clear - it's not them. It's not Peter and Paul who are powerful, it's the work of the Holy Spirit - of the Spirit of

Jesus within them, that is powerful. We, all of us who do this work of spreading the kingdom message, we're all weak, we're human, we make mistakes, we argue, we get lost and confused. We see that, we know that, and when we recognize that this work isn't about us, it's about spreading Jesus' message of radical, inclusive, love, then we get back on track.

Those early days were not always easy. While a great many joined the Way, there were others who were jealous, confused, threatened by the way the Holy Spirit was powerfully working in and among us. They claimed we, the followers of Jesus, were turning the world upside down. And we were! Turning it upside down and inside out, proclaiming release from the bonds of sin and laws that did not promote life. "For freedom, Christ has set us free, stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" - that was a favorite line of Paul's.

My dear brother, Jason, in Thessalonica, was imprisoned simply for providing hospitality to our leaders. So it was not without risk that I opened my home. But if I was free, was I not also called to live into Christ's freedom and welcome all? You see my home became the gathering place here in Philippi. What you now call the church, it all began here, in our homes - where we encouraged one another, prayed with one another, ate with one another. Paul and the others found refuge in my home, giving back so much more than they received.

Ach... but for you all today, all this time later, it's different, more challenging for you. You don't have those who saw Jesus, who ate with him, learned from him around you. You don't have those miracles happening before your very eyes! Yes, It's more challenging for you all today, but just as Luke wrote in this book of his, where he said 'the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly', that's your work today too. You, the people of the church, need to be open to the Lord working in and through and among you just as we were in those early days. You need to slow down and listen, be willing to be transformed so that all of us can bring this counter-cultural message, this Good

News, of loving one another, as our ultimate work here in the world. That poem that was recited earlier - did you hear that last line? "What is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" For me, Lydia, it began that day I met Paul by the river. There I found out what it was I was to do with my precious life - give it away, give it to the Lord, and in giving it - finding a life I never expected. Oh there was risk, there's always risk. When I opened my home, I risked a lot - my livelihood my relationships, but what did I gain? I gained life. Life anew. I was made free in Christ to love, to serve, to suffer and to find a Joy I never imagined.

So, tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?