

Text: Acts 16:9-25

### There are Lydias All Around Us

So Moms, are you tired of all the Mother's Day stuff--the newspaper articles and television clips that extol "super moms." You know the women who keep their family fed with gourmet meals and dressed in the latest fashions while they manage to have weekly coffee with friends, advance in a career, save the whales, and look great through it all. I suppose a little self-evaluation is not a bad a thing but if you're going to compare yourself to other women you might as well compare yourself to a woman God favored with the gift of faith as the first convert to Christianity in the whole continent of Europe. Her name was Lydia, an early convert to Christianity, who was a model Christian woman. She humbly received the word of God, and she gladly served the kingdom of God with her talent, time and treasure.

Lydia was from the city of Thyatira in present-day western Turkey. That's not where she was, however, when the Apostle Paul and his companions met her. She was living in the Greek city of Philippi. Philippi was a prominent city of that region having been designated a Roman retirement center for those soldiers and commanders who had finished their service in the Legions. Paul had come to Philippi after receiving a vision of a man urging him to cross the Aegean Sea to spread the gospel in Macedonia the first land in Europe God had sent the gospel to do its work. If the vision led Paul to believe that people would mob him to learn about Jesus as soon as he landed there, he was mistaken. As far as we know Paul didn't find anyone to talk to about Jesus until he reached the city of Philippi. And even then it was several days before Paul and his companions found a group to preach to. And what a humble group it was. This group didn't meet in an ornate synagogue in the city center. They met outside of town on the banks of a river for regular prayer. And ironically (despite Paul's vision being that of a man motioning for him to come to help them) there wasn't a single man in the bunch!

Lydia it seems was one of the women who regularly gathered for prayer at this spot. We're told that she was a dealer in purple cloth a very lucrative business. She had obviously built a successful business for herself because she was later able to house Paul and his companions while they stayed in Philippi. It seems that Lydia already knew something about the true God before Paul got to her. She may have learned about God from the many Jews who lived in her hometown of Thyatira. But although she knew about God, she still hadn't heard that God's promised Messiah had come in the person of Jesus. This, of course, is what Paul told Lydia and she believed.

Let's pause here to mention a few things that make Lydia a model Christian woman. First even though Lydia was a successful businesswoman she made time for regular worship. As busy as she must have been she wasn't too busy to make the weekly trek out to the river to join fellow believers in prayer. Don't you think it would have been easy for Lydia to say, "Why do I need to go down to the river to pray? I can do that right here in my home and save myself time and hassle." Lydia understood the importance of getting together with fellow believers. She knew that she needed their encouragement and that she could be an encouragement to them.

Lydia sets an example for anyone who considers himself or herself a believer. Although she wouldn't have known this portion of Scripture since it hadn't been written yet, Lydia would have agreed whole-heartedly with the words, "Let us not give up

meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:25). She’ll make the effort to regularly join fellow believers or at least arrange to have believers regularly come to her with God’s Word. Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than sticking your hand in the freezer makes you an ice cream bar. But if you are an ice cream bar, you better not stay out of the freezer. Likewise if you are a true believer, you better not stay away from God’s house and his people otherwise your faith can melt.

Despite being a successful businesswoman who must have enjoyed the finer things of life, Lydia wasn’t put off by the humble surroundings of her prayer group. You probably wouldn’t mind meeting by the river today for worship since it’s nice out but what about when it gets hot and the mosquitoes come out? Would you be as eager to gather for outside worship then? And wouldn’t it have been easy for Lydia to take the study of God’s Word lightly because of her simple surroundings? I hope that’s not what you think when you come to our little church. Your surroundings here are not spectacular like a cathedral but the Word you receive here is no less magnificent. Thankfully this congregation has already agreed that it’s time we start feasting on the gourmet food of God’s Word in surroundings that match the Word’s splendor. The building isn’t that important in and of itself but it does provide a space, a holy space, where we can experience the Word and sacraments in appropriate sincerity.

What else is worth emulating about Lydia? How about the way in which she humbly received the Word of God Paul shared with her? She believed what Paul said about Jesus being the only one in the world who can save us from going to hell because of our sins. She didn’t object when Paul must have pointed out her sin as he did with all his other audiences. She didn’t protest and claim that she was a decent person. Lydia was aware of her sins. Had she at times been dishonest in her business dealings? Had she entertained impure thoughts about her customers? Did she sit around the office and complain about her hired help? I don’t know but Lydia knew that she needed to be covered in the cleansing blood Jesus shed on the cross. And so do we.

But here’s the thing about Lydia’s conversion. She couldn’t take credit for it. She couldn’t go home after meeting Paul and announce to family and friends that she had made the decision to follow Jesus. Luke, who is the author of our text, makes that clear when he writes: “The Lord opened her heart to respond [better: to give heed] to Paul’s message” (Acts 16:14b). Thankfully God the Holy Spirit still does today what he did for Lydia. He works through the good news words of the Bible, not dazzling light shows, to create faith. Do you see why the study of God’s Word is so important and why we put such an emphasis on it here in this congregation? It’s because that’s how God communicates with us. More than that, it’s how he enlightens and empowers us. It’s how we come to nod our heads, as did Lydia, when we’re told: “Jesus died and rose again for you. Heaven is yours!”

Lydia’s newfound faith didn’t sit on her heart like foam on beer, to put it as Martin Luther did. Her faith was active. She went home and told her household about Jesus. And they too were baptized. We all have people close to us with whom we can share Jesus. Sure we need to be concerned about whether or not people on the other side of the world hear about Jesus but let’s not forget about those people who sit with us at the kitchen table. Speak openly about your faith and the things that you learn from God’s

Word. God can and will work through that witness as he worked through the witness of Lydia.

But Lydia wasn't content just to tell her family about Jesus. She wanted to support the work Paul and his companions were doing. So she invited them to stay at her house. She did more than invite them. She insisted they stay! Have you ever listened to a missionary's presentation on his work in a far-flung country and think: "Boy, I could never do that?" But you do participate in that work whenever you support mission work. Jesus even once said that whoever welcomes a prophet because he is a prophet, because he shares God's Word with others, will receive a prophet's reward (Matthew 10:41).

Paul eventually moved on from Philippi to spread God's Word in other cities. As far as we know Lydia didn't sell her business and follow the apostle. It seems that she stayed on in Philippi and kept doing what God had given her gifts to do: sell purple cloth and share the good news of Jesus. When she did this to the best of her ability and to God's glory, then she was fulfilling God's will for her. And so do you, dear women of Trinity who work with your children on their confirmation homework, teach Sunday School or work with the Women in Mission or pray for the work here at Trinity or pray and serve those in nursing homes or in need. You also fulfill God's will when you put in an honest day's work at the office, fold laundry, change a diaper or when you minister to your friends to God's glory.

No, the world doesn't understand what makes a model woman or a Mother even on Mother's Day. It's not about being able to multitask 24/7 while dressing like a model on the cover of Vogue. It's about humbly receiving God's Word and gladly serving God's kingdom, just as Lydia did. Just think how we are surrounded by Lydias here at Trinity every single day. So to all you women, mothers or not, mature or young we offer thanks for your special service and the love of Christ you share. Amen.