

“Her Perspective: Lydia”

Series: *Her Perspective*

Scripture: Acts 16:6-15

Rev. Pen Peery



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

During the month of July we've been focusing on women in the Bible. There are a number of women we haven't talked about, of course. This week I had someone email me asking why we weren't talking about Mary. I remember what one of our elementary-aged biblical scholars said a few weeks ago during Children's Time: "Pastor Pen, there are about 40 different Marys." That's true – and at other times of the church year...Christmas and Easter, mainly – we lift up a few of those 40 different Marys in the pulpit.

Today, though, we are going to talk about a woman who rarely gets mentioned. Her name is Lydia.

Before we hear her story, let us go to God in prayer:

Open us, by your Spirit, Lord – that in this Scripture we might encounter your word. And that – through your word – we might discover good news and inspiration for the ways we are called to live in response. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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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

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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 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.

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Have you ever seen the Cathedral at Notre Dame in Paris? The newly restored flying buttresses? The vaulted ceilings that have echoed with the prayers and songs of God’s people for almost nine centuries?

Or what about the so-called “Gaudi Cathedral” in Barcelona? It’s been under construction for over 140 years. An absolute architectural marvel.

Or what about Westminster Abby in London? Or the ancient churches on the Island of Iona in western Scotland. Or St. Giles church in Edinburg?

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What about the Basilica of St. Peter's in Vatican City?

And how about those stories about how our particular flavor of Christianity came to be: with a monk named Martin Luther tacking 95 thoughts/questions on the church door in Wittenburg, Germany. Or a French lawyer named John Calvin taking refuge in Geneva to work out his thoughts on the Institutes of the Christian Religion. Or that clergyman, John Knox, who studied with Calvin and then took his learning back to Scotland to help give birth to us Presbyterians.

Christianity has played a major role in Europe (which, in turn, helped Christianity play a major role in the United States of America). And – sure, this history of Christianity in Europe isn't always glamorous...but by-and-large the legacy of Christianity forged in Europe has been a gift to the world. It's why you and I are here.

And do you know who you can thank for that gift?

That's right. Her name is Lydia.

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You remember the story of Paul’s conversion, right? The man known as Saul – who at one time *persecuted* Christians – saw a vision of the resurrected Christ. It knocked him off his horse and changed his life – and his name. Saul became Paul – and, of all the earliest disciples of Jesus, Paul did the most to spread the good news of the gospel to other parts of the world beyond Israel.

Three times, the Scripture tells us, Paul embarked upon what became called “a missionary journey” – where he travelled to try to tell others about Jesus’s life and the promise of resurrection hope. Sometimes, the places Paul visited had heard about Jesus. Many times, they hadn’t. Sometimes, Paul helped start churches where he carried the gospel message. Other times, there were churches already there and he gave the equivalent of a first-century tent revival.

Until today’s passage, though, Paul (nor the message of the gospel) had ever crossed over into Europe. Then, one night on this second of his missionary journeys, he had a vision. It was a vision of a man from Macedonia (modern day Greece) with a request for Paul to help.

Paul might have seen a vision of a man from Macedonia in his dreams, but the first person we hear about Paul seeing with actual eyes was a woman named Lydia.

Turns out, Lydia was no shrinking violet.

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She was a dealer in purple cloth – which, in that day, was a very valuable commodity and suggested that Lydia was a woman of considerable means.

She seems to be the head of her household – not a frequent thing in a patriarchal day and age.

If you noticed, though she lived in Philippi (which was in Macedonia – or modern-day Greece), she was originally from Thyatira (which is in Asia Minor – or modern day Turkey). So as an outsider herself, she understood well the value of the hospitality she was about to provide to Paul and his friends.

Lydia and her household are the first known converts to Christianity in Europe.

But more than just being open to receive Christ’s message through Paul’s teaching and preaching – Lydia understood that the thing Paul was trying to build – a movement we’ve come to call the Church – Lydia understood that it takes a lot more than one man and a few sermons to build something that matters.

The Scripture says that after she was baptized, she invited Paul and his friends to stay at her home. She was extending them hospitality. “And she prevailed upon us,” the text says. I wonder if you have ever encountered that kind of hospitality before...not the lukewarm offer to help...but the kind of help and support that you know you had better accept if you know what is good for you...that’s what I think is behind the meaning of “and she prevailed against us.”

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You might remember that after Paul meets Lydia and stays at her home, he and Silas and their friends get arrested in Philippi. Then – while they were waiting for their judgment – an earthquake shakes open the doors of the jail...and eventually they go free. It was a moment that caught the attention of the city – it led to more people deciding to follow in the way of Jesus – it helped grow the church. Guess who invited Paul and his friends to stay with her again after that episode? Lydia.

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The kind of hospitality that Lydia offered Paul and his companions meant something much more than a meal and a place to lay their heads. You might say that what Lydia offered was more akin to venture capital – and social capital, for sure. For a woman of means to welcome and resource a newcomer like Paul who brought a gospel message that both inspired and challenged people – well...it helps. It made the ministry that Paul was called to do possible – and effective.

Over his lifetime, Paul helped start many churches, and nurture many others. The crown jewel, though, was the church in Philippi...where I imagine Lydia might have been chair of the women of the church.

I’m certainly no Paul – but I’ve been in enough churches as the one asked to preach that I’ve bumped into a number of Lydias before.

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17 and a half years ago, Lindsey, our – at the time – only child (who had just learned to walk), and I drove from the east coast that had been home all of our lives to northwest Louisiana. I was 31 years old and was about to start my first job as a Senior Pastor.

The first night – literally, ***the first night***, we were in town – we had to pop out to buy something at Target. Word had gotten out that the new pastor and family were in town, and somewhere around the aisle for pampers and formula I got a text from the chair of my search committee that said: “Betty knows you’re here and at Target. She is driving up and down the parking lot looking for out of town license plates.”

We waited Betty out that night – but it didn’t take 24 hours after that for her to “prevail upon us.”

Meals, babysitting, offers to host a welcome party at her lovely home, invitations to lunch to help connect both Lindsey and me to colleagues and friends, quiet suggestions about who needed their pastor to make a visit – and in what order...I can’t begin to count the number of ways Betty covered us in hospitality.

She wasn’t just being nice and helping us feel comfortable in our new home (though she certainly did that): she was credentialing us, she was resourcing us, she was building the

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church with us – even though I was the one who wore the robe and stood in the pulpit on Sunday morning.

At 31-years-old and all of a sudden “in charge” – my biggest fear was that I was too inexperienced to be the one to successfully guide the church to succeed in its next chapter. That fear was well-founded.

What Betty taught me is that when it comes to church, we’re in it together. We are co-laborers in the vineyard. None of us are alone.

Betty isn’t the only Lydia I’ve met. There are plenty of you who are Lydia’s too. And – in this moment – I also think of the Lydia’s of this place who have departed, but who now see God face-to-face.

In the church, hospitality doesn’t just extend to the pastor or the staff.

It also extends to the neighbor living in homelessness who needs a warm place to be on Monday and Tuesday nights in the winter.

It extends to the person picking up groceries at the Loaves and Fishes food pantry whose car runs out of gas and needs a fill-up (which happened last week).

It extends to the brave young adult who is new to town and decides to brave walking into worship on Sunday.

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It extends to the lonely widower who seeks the quiet of the 9:00 am contemplative service.

It extends to the stranger – whose story we don’t yet know, but who needs to be in God’s presence.

That work – of hospitality – of welcoming – of validating – of supporting – that is the work of the community. That is what it means **to be** the church.

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I don’t know if you have ever wondered about this – or felt this – but I have.

Sometimes when I think about the kinds of people that Jesus helped – and when I think about the kind of lives that Jesus’ disciples led – and when I think about the places...even today...where the church is growing and where the gospel is taking root – I notice that, a lot of the time, it is in places and with people who have **much less means** than we do.

I find myself wondering if the fact that we have such a rich history and nice buildings and things and resources and opportunities somehow gets in the way of our ability to live the gospel, or share the gospel, because...sometimes...having an abundance of means can do that.

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But, maybe, for us – part of the good news of this morning’s Scripture is to remember that it was a woman of means named Lydia who *used her influence and her resources* in the practice of hospitality for the sake helping to spread the good news of the gospel.

And, maybe, building on that legacy – maybe our call as a church is tied into ways that we can provide more avenues of welcome; that we can position ourselves to **support** the new thing that God is doing; that we can direct our influence and resources in ways that **come along side** those people and ideas that are planting new seeds for God’s kingdom.

May it be so.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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