

Lydia: The Lord Opened Her Heart; She Opened Her Home

Acts 16:9-15

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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It was a man who spoke to Paul in his midnight vision. It was a man who pled with Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." So when Paul got to Philippi, it was a man he was looking for. I can see him in the agora, the farmers' market, looking intently at every passing face, searching for the man who had so urgently called him to Macedonia. And when Paul didn't find him in the agora he moved to the Egnatian Way, the great Roman highway that stretched from the Aegean Sea to the Adriatic. You can still see long stretches of the Egnatian Way winding through the valleys and over the hills of northern Greece, so well did the Roman engineers do their job over two millennia ago. And I can visualize Paul standing on the sidewalk of that commercial highway, gazing at every passing businessman. But there was not a single male countenance that matched the eager face in the Troas vision.

Had this been Corinth or Thessalonica, Paul would have gone straight to the synagogue to find his man, but evidently there was no synagogue in Philippi. Jewish custom required that there be at least ten male Jews to establish a synagogue. And if there were fewer than ten, the few Jews who did live in the town would establish what was called "a place of prayer" along the banks of a river or stream, in keeping with the 137th Psalm, "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." The 137th Psalm was composed six centuries before Christ when the Jews were deported to Babylon and had to create makeshift places of worship. Ever since then, groups of Jews too few to form a synagogue would gather by whatever water they could find, and it was on the banks of the Gangites River just outside Philippi that Paul and his team stumbled upon such a group.

And in that party he met not a man, but a woman. Her name was Lydia and about all we know about her is that she was "a worshiper of God and a dealer in purple cloth." The phrase "worshiper of God" means that Lydia was a proselyte, a non-Jew who worshiped the Hebrew God. Secondly, she was an executive in a fabric company, but not just any kind of fabric. Purple fabric was reserved for nobility and for the very rich. It was expensive cloth, which meant that Lydia was in all probability herself a woman of wealth. And as Paul spoke to the group about Jesus Christ, the Lord opened her heart. She turned in faith to Jesus as her Savior and was baptized, the first believer on the continent of Europe.

And it wasn't Paul's persuasive logic, or personal charm, or verbal eloquence that led Lydia to faith in Christ. "The Lord opened her heart." And it takes more than glossy advertising, and computer generated visual effects, and pricy television shows to lead twenty-first century women and men to faith. It is the living Christ who stands at the door and knocks. (Revelation 3:20) It is Jesus Christ who promises, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:32) And in Acts 2:47 we are told that "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Certainly, human agency is important. "How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?" Paul asks in Romans 10:14. "And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" So, yes, we preachers have a solemn responsibility to proclaim the Good News. But unless the Lord opens hearts, my words will be like seed sown on rocky soil. They will not and cannot penetrate.

So the Lord opened Lydia's heart, and in turn Lydia opened her home: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my home." Sounds like a simple thing, doesn't it, almost trivial. But there's more to this invitation than a Sunday dinner of fried chicken and dumplings. Let me illustrate. While in Princeton recently Carol and I drove to Washington's Crossing where the General and 2400 soldiers crossed the Delaware on Christmas night, 1776. The next morning they marched nine miles east to fight and win the Battle of Trenton, which became a turning point in the battle for independence. But on Christmas night the General commandeered a small cottage on the north bank of the Delaware, a cottage that became, for that one notable night, the General's headquarters. It wasn't much of a house apparently, but it got Washington out of the snow before marching on to Trenton. In fact, there are similar houses scattered throughout the east, homes where Washington established temporary headquarters, laid out his battle plans, and slept before going into battle.

When Paul crossed the Aegean to Macedonia, it was like Washington crossing the Delaware. Philippi was the beachhead for the Gospel's invasion into Europe. Paul and his team had spent many years in Asia and the Middle East, but they had never crossed into Europe until they came to Philippi. So when Lydia opened her home to Paul, it was more than hospitality. It was a strategic maneuver. Her house became Paul's initial command center, the first of many European headquarters from which he and his team would move out to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

And because Lydia was a woman of means, she no doubt financed Paul's ministry during his time in Philippi, and perhaps supported him when he pushed on into Greece, just as we support our members who go out as missionaries to the four corners of the globe. When the Lord opened Lydia's heart, she opened not only her home, but her handbag.

Somewhere in the world today there is a pastor who is hearing the Macedonian call to come to Washington, D.C. to serve this grand congregation. This is not an announcement! I know no more about the selection of the new pastor than you do, and that's how it should be. The Pastor Nominating Committee must protect the names of those who are under consideration, for if word got back to the churches they now serve, it could destroy their effectiveness there. But it's going to happen sooner rather than later, and I urge you to adopt Lydia as the prototype for welcoming your new pastor. Open your hearts and your homes as you have opened them to Carol and to me over the past two years. This is one of the most welcoming and hospitable congregations we have ever served. Now make that the new pastor's experience as well. Open your hearts and your homes; and then open your handbags and your wallets so your pastor will not suffer buyer's remorse. Buyer's remorse occurs when, after buying a new home, the roof springs a leak and cracks appear in the foundation. Buyer's remorse makes one ask, "Did I make the right decision?"

Could that possibly happen to a candidate for pastor of The National Presbyterian Church? Sadly, yes. Our fiscal year ends in just four weeks, on June 30, and our trustees are predicting a budgetary shortfall of \$50,000. That could cause a candidate to wonder if this is the right place to be. If, on the other hand, we move into the new fiscal year on July 1 with our stewardship flags at full mast, with all bills paid and all mission commitments met, your new pastor will arrive with absolute confidence that this is the place to be.

Like Lydia, open your hearts, your homes, and your handbags. And not only to bolster confidence in your new pastor. Rather, to ensure that this church will stand for generations to come as a command center in our Lord's campaign to save the world.