

Lydia
Acts 16:6-15

Wayne Eberly
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When Jesus rose from the dead he gathered his disciples and told them to wait for the Holy Spirit. When they received the Holy Spirit, Jesus said they would receive power, and in the power of the Holy Spirit the disciples would be witnesses for Jesus in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. That is how the Book of Acts begins. In two weeks we will celebrate Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit came upon those waiting disciples, filling them with the power of the Holy Spirit. This morning, we are down the road quite a ways. We are in Acts 16. By this point the Apostle Paul has had his great conversion experience and he is now one of those very witnesses who are taking the gospel in an ever expanding outreach of evangelism.

If you have ever taken the time to look at a map of the missionary journeys of Paul, they all seem to be fairly orderly events. Acts tells us of three missionary journeys of Paul. They all begin in Antioch, a town mentioned several times in Acts. It was at Antioch that Barnabas first teamed up with Paul and together they met with the church in Antioch and taught them for a whole year. These disciples of Jesus, these followers of Jesus named Barnabas and Paul, these disciples discipled the believers in Antioch. It was at Antioch that disciples of Jesus were first called Christians. It is from Antioch that three different times the church sent Paul out on missionary journeys. Each journey involved both the planning of Paul and his companions about where they would go, and the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit.

Our passage today tells us that Paul and his companions arrived in Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. But if we read the verses immediately before Paul arrived in Philippi we see this mixture of human plans and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding these missionaries. Paul and his companions are traveling throughout the region of Galatia. They had intended to preach the word in the province of Asia, but the Holy Spirit kept them from doing that. In other words, the Holy Spirit shut the door on going to Asia. Then they

came to a border and tried to enter Bithynia, but the Holy Spirit would not allow them to enter Bithynia. In other words, the Holy Spirit shut the door on going to Bithynia. Okay, that's fine. But if these doors keep shutting, where exactly are we supposed to go? You can almost imagine Paul looking up to heaven and holding out his hands. Then where?

Well, that night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Aha! Paul gets it. Not Asia, not Bithynia, but Macedonia. After the closed doors Paul and his companions welcomed this door that is apparently opened by the Holy Spirit. "We got ready at once to leave for Macedonia." After spending a few days in Philippi, Paul went outside the city gate to the river, with the expectation there would be a place of prayer, and some godly people would gather at that place of prayer. Sure enough a group of women had gathered at the river.

It is hard not to believe that Paul has been guided this whole time, ever since he left Antioch many days and many miles before, so that he was at the river outside the city gate of Philippi just so he could meet with these particular women on this particular day. After all, the Holy Spirit shut doors twice and a man appeared to Paul in a dream saying, "Come to Macedonia." And yet we would also miss something of great importance if we fail to recognize that Paul is not just sitting back and waiting to be transported from point A to point B. Paul is actively engaged. He uses his common sense and awareness of traditions to go to the river where he suspected people would gather for prayer. And at the river, even though in his dream it was a man saying come to Macedonia, he doesn't ignore the ones who have gathered. You see, it wasn't a man at the river. It was a group of women. It obviously would have been a mistake on Paul's part to ask, "When do the men get here?" I had the dream. I saw the vision. It was a man who called me to come. When do the men get here? Instead of waiting for the men to arrive, Paul understands that on this day, and perhaps many others, the best man for the job is a woman. And the woman's name is Lydia.

I wonder if we are also to understand that in a similar way, God has been guiding and leading Lydia so she is at this particular place at this particular time. Lydia is from Thyatira, a town in modern day Turkey which is about 240 miles from Philippi. Like Paul she has traveled a long distance to be at this particular place at this particular time. She is a dealer in purple cloth, “an extravagant textile affordable only to the wealthy.” Apparently Lydia is “a businesswoman of no small stature and is in charge of her own household. Notice that Lydia is not associated with a man, indicating she is in full command of her property.”¹ Lydia has not only traveled a great distance, she has great resources, which we will see in just a moment come in very handy for helping the word of God spread. She invites Paul and his companions to come and stay at her house.

Before that, there is one more critical way God has been guiding and shaping the life of this woman named Lydia. Lydia is a worshiper of God. Telling us Lydia is a worshiper of God is the way the New Testament writers tell us she was a Gentile, and not a Jew. And yet even as a Gentile, she has already shown interest in the God of the Jews. She is a worshiper of God. Her heart was already being worked on by God, preparing her to be at this particular place at this particular time.

So with doors closing and opening and the Holy Spirit guiding and directing particular people to be at particular places at particular times, when all the particular players have been gathered together, the message of God is proclaimed. And when the message of God is proclaimed we come to realize Paul and Lydia were indeed brought together at that particular time and that particular place. When Lydia hears the gospel message, it is the Lord himself who opens her heart to respond. Right there at the river she and the members of her household are baptized.

With all of this emphasis on particular times and particular places, and particular people, it turns out perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from this very particular story is that the work of God is universal. Up to this point in Acts all of the missionary work has been done in Asia Minor, and the ministry of Jesus and the disciples was in the Middle East, in Israel and the surrounding area. When Paul crossed into Macedonia he and the gospel message entered into Europe. Macedonia, in general, and

¹ David Forney, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, p. 476

Philippi in particular, are in Europe. As far as we know Lydia, a Gentile woman was the first Christian convert in Europe. And as Paul so clearly states in several of his letters, the gospel message, although it comes to particular people in particular times and particular places, is ultimately a message that tears down dividing walls and erases distinctions based on particular things like wealth and race and culture and gender. When Lydia is baptized you can almost hear Paul saying, “There is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female.” The gospel of Jesus Christ is for anyone, anywhere, at any time. Because of that we believe the gospel is for everyone, everywhere, at every time.

This wonderful and creative tension between the particular and the universal might have played out even in the message Paul preached that day by the river in Philippi. We have to assume he told the story of the new creation that is found in Jesus Christ. Being baptized means we die to our old self, and we die to the rulers of this world. That is what is symbolized as we go under the waters of baptism. As we rise we are born into the new life and new relationship with God, where the righteousness of God is freely given to all who believe. The old is gone and the new comes. All this is through Christ Jesus, who went through his own baptism and resurrection, dying on the cross and rising again from the grave. We can be assured in some way, shape, or form Paul shared this universal gospel message. What if he also found a way to speak particularly to Lydia that day by the river at Philippi?

Lydia was a woman of means, a woman of influence. Lydia was an independent woman in a time when that was rare. Would she have been prepared to hear a message about the Son of God, who although all powerful and equal with God in every way, chose to empty himself of all his power, becoming not only human, but becoming a servant, and humbling himself even to the point of death. Purple is the color of royalty, with ties dating back to the ancient world, where it was prized for its bold hues and often reserved for the upper crust. The Persian king Cyrus adopted a purple tunic as his royal uniform. Some Roman emperors forbid their citizens from wearing purple clothing under penalty of death.²

² Evan Andrews, www.history.com “Why is purple considered the color of royalty?”

As Paul was sharing the message about Jesus Christ, maybe he reached over and took some of the purple cloth Lydia had with her, and proceeded to share with her one of the early hymns of the church. To a woman who knew power and undoubtedly rubbed shoulders with rulers and ones in authority, maybe Paul told her about Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of Lords. Holding that royal fabric in his hands, that fabric which was the color purple, maybe Paul said to her, “Jesus was in very nature God, but he did not consider being equal with God something to grasp onto; instead, he emptied himself, he made himself nothing by taking the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” That is what Jesus did. That is who Jesus is. And we call him our King. We call him our Lord.

Now there is no record we are aware of that this took place, with the purple cloth and what not. But that passage I just read to you is in the Bible. In fact, it is in one of the letters the Apostle Paul wrote. It is in one of the letters to one of the churches he once helped get started. The particular church that Paul wrote those words to is the church in Philippi, where a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, just happened to be at that particular time and at that particular place to hear a universal message of salvation that happened to be particularly for her. Whether or not she associated Jesus with the purple cloth with which she worked so closely, she certainly put into practice the exhortation Paul included with the passage of Jesus becoming a servant. Paul said, “Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus.” Lydia is baptized and before she can even shake the water out of her hair she is inviting Paul and his companions to come to her home so she can serve them with hospitality.

Now I must admit that all of this talk about particular people being in particular places for a particular purpose can be taken too far. For instance, now that we know the first thing Lydia did upon being converted was to invite Paul to come and stay at her house, it is possible to take this emphasis on particularity too far. I guess if I took this particular thing too far I could say that God orchestrated all of these events just so that the preacher could get invited after worship for a Sunday lunch. I mean, what does Lydia do after the sermon? She invites the preacher over for some fried chicken and mashed potatoes. Or BBQ Brisket. Or a clam bake. Shoot, us preachers would be happy with a grinder. It all sounds good to me, God doing all these particular things so the preacher doesn't go hungry. Hallelujah and thanks be to God! Can I get an Amen!

No. No! NO! That doesn't even begin to capture what is happening in this beautiful encounter that takes place by the river in Philippi. One commentator captures what is happening. "By hosting the missionaries, Lydia becomes one of them, a new convert already in the business of converting others. We can only imagine how many heard the good news while gathered at Lydia's house."³ Lydia becomes one of them. She demonstrates it by immediately offering herself as a servant. She gets it. She is one of them.

That image of becoming one of them fits really well with the whole narrative in Acts chapter 16. You see it is this same chapter in Acts that includes a major transition in the telling of the missionary journey. As the missionaries have traveled to all of these various places, the author has told us they went here and they went there and they did this and they did that. It is all about they and them. But that night when Paul had the vision, that night when Paul heard a man in Macedonia begging, "Come over here and help us," that night something significant changed in the narrative of Acts. From then on the author no longer uses they and them. Chapter 16 and verse 8 says, "So they passed by Mysia and they went down to Troas." Come the next morning the author says, "**We** got ready at once to leave for Macedonia." With the narrator, the author, it moves from they and them to we and us. Even the narrator becomes one of the team, one of the community, one of the family, one of the members, one of the Body of Christ.

³ Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, p. 478.

In a nutshell that is what Acts is all about. Today we are gathered as particular people at this particular place for this particular time. Could this be the day it happens for you? Could this be the day it changes in your life, the day it moves from being about they and them and it becomes we and us. Could this be the day you realize the universal and timeless message about the God who loves this world so much he sent his Beloved Son Jesus Christ to be Lord and Savior is for you. It happened to Lydia. It happened to Paul. It happened to the narrator. By the grace of God I hope and pray it happens to you. I hope and pray it happens to each one of us. I hope and pray it happens to every one of us.