

“Mother Lydia”
Acts 16:9-15
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Sixth Sunday of Easter, Mother’s Day
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Imagine boarding an airplane. As you board, you notice that the pilot is a woman. No problem. Still, it is a new experience for you.

As you find your seat, you notice three persons sitting immediately behind you. One is a young boy of about six or seven. Next to him is a man in his early thirties. And next to the man is a woman in her early sixties. You can not help overhearing the conversation among these three persons as the plane makes final plans for departure. It is not long before you realize that they are the female pilot's family. The boy is her son. The man is her husband. And the older woman is her mother. Suddenly you realize why the family is on the plane. This is the first time the female pilot is the head of a flight crew! They are there to honor her promotion.

The plane taxis down the runway and poises itself for takeoff. The engines begin to roar, and the plane gains speed quickly. Within seconds they are airborne. As the plane begins to ascend, the six-year-old boy begins to applaud! "Way to go, Mom. Way to go!"

This morning we are applauding our Moms. "Way to go, Moms, way to go!" Truly, today's Mom deserves all the support and applause she can get. But today's scripture broadens the accolades from our deserving Mom's in particular to women in general.

Scene 1 The Holy Spirit Calls Paul, calls us

In a dream, God calls Paul to cross the sea from Asia Minor to Macedonia, to "preach the good news" and "help us." So he sailed from his familiar stomping grounds of Asia Minor, to the mountainous island of Samothrace. Samothrace in the Aegean Sea, halfway between ancient Troy in Asia Minor and the port city of Neapolis. From Samothrace he sailed to Neapolis. And from Neapolis he walked to Philippi, a Roman colony of Roman veterans and other Gentiles. Paul's journey was the first European Christian missionary expedition. To cities with strange sounding names like Samothrace, Neapolis, and Philippi. Teaching the Good News to teach those dirty, heathen, non Jewish, non Christian Europeans. Why, they don't even have a building in which to worship God. So they have to meet by the river outside of town. Whatever would his Mother say when he visits her on Mother's Day?

This week, I was trying to think of a modern day illustration. And it was right in front of me. I did not have to look very hard. Stella heard God's call to the villages of Tamariz and Nuevo Canaan in the Mayan Peten. Strange sounding names, Tamariz and Nuevo Canaan. Just as there is patriarchy and racism in Paul's day, fences Paul wants to tear down, there are also fences in the Mayan Peten. The Mayan Peten to which Stella is going to travel. Patriarchy is strong there, and there is racism between the Ladinos, which is what the Hispanics are called there, and the Kekchi Indians, who are the oppressed in their culture. Stella is going to apply fluoride to the teeth of children, and even to build a church building in Nuevo Canaan, where, like Philippi, they currently have no building. But Stella will be doing more than this. Stella will also be teaching both children and adults the Good News. The Good News that all of us who look differently and act differently and believe differently, that we are all one in Christ Jesus. You see, the Good News in today's lesson is not that God loves men more than women, or Jews more than Greeks, or any other category that you can think of more than another. The Good News that Paul teaches in today's lesson, and that Stella is going to Guatemala to teach, is that God loves all of humanity, not some more than others. Yes there are reports in the NYT about sporadic violence against women in Guatemala. But Stella trusts in God.

scene 2 Lydia is considered unclean. There are those in our culture who are considered unclean.

Paul and Luke sit down outside the gate by the river because there is no synagogue in Philippi, and speak to the women gathered there, including Lydia. Lydia is a convert to Judaism, but has not had the full revelation of the Good News. As in the communities of the Mayan Peten, worshipping communities in Philippi are composed mostly of women. And you cannot build a true synagogue unless there are 10 male prospective members. You can have, in Paul and Lydia's day, 100 prospective female members, but if there are only 9 men, there will be no synagogue.

We know something else about Lydia. She has the scandalous job outside the home as a dealer of purple cloth. Purple cloth is a luxury item for the wealthy, but the purple from what was for the Jews unclean, the Murex shellfish, a mollusc. Have you ever heard that some things are like sausage? That everyone likes to eat sausage, but no one wants to see how it is made? Turning the shellfish into purple cloth is like making sausage. And this is what Lydia does. Lydia does what needs to be done, including dealing with unclean shellfish. Think of snails, worms, and maggots. Doing what self respecting Jewish men will not do, and doing it well.

The culture and society of Paul's time were very patriarchal, and the culture was, frankly, racist. His was a society that subjugated women, and abhorred diversity. In Paul's society you were either a male or female, and either Jew or a Gentile. Sounds like the US before the women's suffrage, doesn't it? Some say it sounds

like the US today. Sounds like the US before MLK and the Freedom Riders of the 1960s, doesn't it? Some say it sounds like the US today. We have always cherry picked the scripture to support our preconceived notions of morals and what is right and wrong. Scripture says that women should not speak in church, and to be right with God, one must not associate with unclean Gentiles. But it also says that there is no longer Greek nor Jew, no longer male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus. So what are we going to believe? I have heard it said that whenever a circle is drawn to exclude others, the church must decide where would Jesus hang out, inside with the pure of deed pure of creed or pure of breed, or outside the circle with the outcasts.

The Jerusalem Temple had several courts arranged more or less in circles. The outermost court was the court of women. Everyone could go into that court. The next court traveling inward was the court of the Gentiles. It should have been called the court of the Gentile men. Women were not allowed. The only ones admitted to the inner sanctum were the Jewish men. For a Gentile to go into that court was punishable by death. One writer says, "If God cannot work through a religious institution, God will work around it."

So here comes Paul, sent by God. Paul was not a racist. He promoted intermingling of Jews and Gentiles within the church. He said, "There is no longer Jew nor Greek." He also was not a sexist. His comments about women not speaking in the Corinthian church have been shown to be out of context. He was talking about particular trouble makers who happened to be women, not women in general.

Religious leaders told Abraham Lincoln before he signed the Emancipation Proclamation that if he did so he would overturn the moral fabric of society, the moral fabric prescribed by scripture. His answer was that there was more than one interpretation of scripture, and as the leader of our country, he trusted in God to lead him to make the right interpretation. And the rest is history. The USA was one of the last nations to ban slavery. As good and righteous as we think we are, there are times when OUR COUNTRY has been the world's tail light instead of its head light. There are also times when it seems THE CHURCH is the tail light instead of the headlight. It has been too long in coming that women may teach men and lead the church by discerning the mind of Christ. The PC(USA) is one of the few denominations where this happens, this decision occurring only a few short decades ago. And even today, Sunday morning is considered the most racially segregated time in our country. Fortunately this is NOT the case in our church. Our particular church welcomes diversity.

Mother Lydia is a practical person who does not mind getting her hands dirty. Or should I say, perpetually purple. But because she rubs elbows with the only people who can purchase her wares, the wealthy elite, she is also a connector. She is a business woman who has contacts with the elite. And God gave her a trusting heart. Lydia is a connector, a practical person, who does not mind getting

her hands dirty, and who as a connector opens up the Gentile community to Paul. Opens up the first ever mission to Europe. But because of her trade, her gender, and her status as a Gentile, she is unclean. Neither women's suffrage nor the Freedom Riders have happened yet. And they have not yet happened in the Mayan Peten. And some say they have not had their full benefit in the US to date either.

scene 3 Lydia is hospitable, the church is hospitable

When was the last time you sat down by a river? Close your eyes for a moment. Go ahead, close them. Imagine sitting by a river, and hearing the sound of gurgling water and feel the dampness. Imagine the water washing away your bitterness, your shame, your sadness, and your fear and anxiety. Imagine the river coming from God, and going back to God, carrying your prayers as it goes. Do you come here today to bathe in the River of the Water of Life, bright as crystal, flowing from and to God? Mother Lydia does. Lydia and the women of Philippi are down by the river at a "place of prayer" outside the gates of the city. God opens Lydia's heart, just as we pray for God to open our hearts. Mother Lydia's heart is opened, and God pours in this love for which we pray. Lydia and the women welcome that foreign missionary who interrupts their prayers and shares with them the Good News of Jesus. They are baptized in the river. You may open your eyes.

Mother Lydia is the first European to be baptized! Lydia's may be the first gentile house, that is non-Jewish, that Paul has ever entered. Paul had read the Bible and had been taught to avoid any contact with people like Lydia. Paul had been instructed and believed he should bar the gates and shut off the flow of the water of life to any and all gentiles. Paul had been taught not to be seen in public with women, let alone gentile women.

Paul is making a leap of faith. Paul is entering into a life of joy, God's peace that passes all understanding. Paul is welcomed into Lydia's household. And Lydia makes a leap of faith in offering this Jewish missionary the hospitality of her home.

All distinctions of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable are passing away. Healing is indeed taking place, down by the river. God is doing new things through Paul and Lydia. This healing and these new things exceed all that we can desire or even imagine!

All of this comes about because Paul has a dream, a vision. He imagines he can go to Macedonia. He goes expecting to find a man there, but surprise: he finds Lydia. And as a result, the world is changed outside the walls of the city, down by the River of the Water of Life.

Conclusion

There are too many spiritual nomads, aimless wanderers; too many of the spiritually homeless who have no moorings, no resting places, no home away from home, no place where they can find rest and hospitality. The church IS the hospitality center of the community, nation, and world. It extends a hand of welcome to the children of God and shows them hospitality whoever they are.

Outside the walls of the city, down by the river of the water of life, all things are possible. It is even possible that we, too, can be changed. We, too, can lay aside long held assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices. Like Paul, we too can lay aside old understandings of the Bible. Like Paul we too can have the vision to go to people beyond the four walls of our church, beyond the boundaries of our community, beyond state lines, beyond the United States of America, and let God's ways be known upon the earth.

Paul had a vision and a dream. MLK had a vision and a dream. Let us all, you and I, dream together. For all things are possible.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and the people say, (Amen)