

Glen Ridge Congregational Church
 March 7, 2010 (Lent 3 - C)
 Acts 16:11-15,40; "Lydia – the Business Woman"
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The wind rustled the branches overhead until they became a swaying canopy whose shadow danced across the circle of women bowed in prayer. It didn't matter that Philippi had too few Jews to support a synagogue; the river's edge had become their place of worship, a green sanctuary where they gathered each Sabbath to pray.

Lydia listened as this stranger from Tarsus, Paul, invoked the familiar words of the shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." Such prayers were like a gust of wind, fanning her longing. A Gentile woman who had come to Philippi from Asia Minor, Lydia was a prominent businesswoman who sold fine cloth to those who could afford it. Though not a Jew, she wanted to know this God powerful enough to part the sea, yet tender enough to yearn for the love of his people.

Paul did not stop with the traditional shema; instead, he spoke of a God whose son Jesus had been murdered for love. This Jesus had risen from his grave after suffering the most agonizing death imaginable. He was Messiah, the merciful and holy one who had come to save God's people.

The women sat quietly as Paul told the story. Even the branches overhead had stopped their noisy rustling. How then, Lydia wondered, was it she felt a strong wind rushing through her. Tears rolled down her cheeks even though she felt like singing. Afterward, she and her household were baptized in a river near Philippi. Lydia insisted that Paul and Silas accept her hospitality. Her home may have become the very center of the church in Philippi. (*from Women of the Bible, a one year devotional study of women in Scripture by Ann Spangler & Jean E. Syswerda*)

Sandwiched among the stories of those first male disciples is an unexpected account – more surprises in the story of our faith. Our series about the early disciples continues today with the story of a woman! About a woman from Philippi – and we have in our Bible a letter written by Paul to the Philippians that contains breathtaking testimony about who Christ is and what Christ has done for us. We can imagine that when Paul wrote this letter he was addressing it to all those who had come to mean so much to him, including Lydia. We don't know much about her – but the fact that she is a named woman in the Bible tells us she's an extraordinary figure. We know she was an Asiatic living in Philippi, one of the Macedonian colonies. It appears that this city was quite a melting pot of many nations – and we know that many of the citizens there were retired Roman soldiers.

The chief object of worship there was Apollo – but we also know there was a small Jewish element in the city as well maintaining faith in Jehovah. It didn't have enough Jews to provide the quorum of ten males to form a synagogue. But it did have its group of praying women.

The city was an important commercial center for water of Lydia's area was so well adapted for dyeing, that no other place could produce the brilliant scarlet cloth – and a unique purple dye that brought the city universal renown. Lydia was a well known seller of this product – and she is an example of a successful business woman in a prosperous city. We know she was prosperous in business because she owned a spacious home and had servants to care for her. We're not sure whether she was of Jewish descent or not – but we are sure that she was a disciple of the Jewish faith – we are told simply, “She worshipped God” – not Apollo.

She was a devout woman. And here's the first model of discipleship for us: in spite of all her secular obligations, Lydia made the time to worship according to the Jewish faith. She made her way to the riverside where she would join with others in prayer. She knew that to be successful in her business and meet the competition, she needed grace as well as knowledge. Her business life and religious life were intertwined – and she eagerly listened to Paul and his companions as they gathered there at the river on the Sabbath. Imagine being part of that group hearing about this Jesus Christ – God with us, in the flesh, who had come that we might all have life in abundance.

We too need grace as well as knowledge – and isn't that our charge too: to ground ourselves in our faith, to keep learning, to be together in worship where we can learn from each other, support each other, grow on this faith journey with each other. Faith development is never a solitary activity: it is always relational. It is always relational in its engagement with culture and people. We too need to connect our faith with our work in the business world, in our world of school, family, everywhere we work and play : they are certainly not mutually exclusive, though for many of us that connection is perhaps fragile.

A couple of weeks ago I heard from a woman – the subject in her email was “Evidence of God” – intriguing for sure. She wrote about a challenge she had been presented with that day at work – she was working on a project and was aware of some real ethical problems with the way the work was being done. It was bothering her terribly and she was having trouble deciding her course of action. She'd come up with three different options but the solution was still not becoming clear. Then as she was taking the subway to Penn Station, still struggling with what direction to take and trying to think of who she could ask to help with the dilemma, she looked up, and there in bold, colorful letters was a poster in the subway that read, “God knows your struggle.” She said a huge smile came over her face – and she says, I was reminded about asking God for guidance – I don't know why I forget that at times but I do. I'm glad for the reminder I get each week in worship. She reports she didn't immediately get an answer to her dilemma, but she knows she'll have help. We all need grace and knowledge, don't we.

Lydia listened eagerly to every word Paul spoke and the Lord will open our hearts to listen eagerly too. When has that happened to you? When have you felt the unmistakable stirring in you that God is leading you? How did it feel? Did you feel the wind rushing through you? When and where has the light dawned for you? Yes – even in the subway on the way to Penn Station – it's not just possible but probable that our open hearts will be touched by God. Our discipleship journey calls us to be ready and open everywhere – in school, in business, at home, everywhere we travel. And our discipleship journey promises us a joy that is unlike any other: even generating big smiles on the subway. And it promises us a freedom – a liberation that comes from

knowing we don't have to do it all – in fact, we can't do it all - that God is with us in every single facet of our lives

Next, our discipleship journey calls us to share our experiences! My friend did that in her email that same day– last week we learned that Andrew was the first to bring others to meet Jesus and Lydia did the same thing. There's a common theme here, isn't there. She was baptized – she made a public confession of her faith – of her conversion to Christianity. And then she was so enthusiastic that she couldn't keep this good news to herself: she told her household all that had happened and all of them were baptized as disciples too. In fact, Lydia has the distinction of being Paul's first European convert - the beginnings of a great missionary effort that continues today. And here's the thing: becoming a Christian did not make her less of a successful businesswoman. Maybe we can imagine that much of her profit was used in the continuing work of the gospel. There's a stewardship message here too, isn't there.

Again we stress that discipleship is never a solitary act – one of my goals for confirmation classes each year is that they form a community that will strengthen them, support them, when they are out “in the world.” It's my hope that as they walk together on this amazing discipleship journey which will so many times be counter-cultural that they will come to know they are not alone – that they share a belief system, a value system, a faith system and that no matter the outside influences that challenge them, there are others who share the same beliefs, the same struggles – and this will give them the courage to do the right thing. There is a group they belong to that will always support them.

Next: as we read about conversions of many people in the Bible, all of these people go and tell...they tell the story, their story, and invite others to share in it. Again, discipleship is more than inviting someone to church or to a church activity: the invitation is to share in a relationship with God, to allow your heart to be opened, and to be transformed. Lydia was transformed – she became first a Christian, then a businesswoman who continued to sell her purple dyes for the glory of God.

Lydia's life transformation was also shown by her eagerness to give missionaries – Paul and Silas – the hospitality of her fine home. Her transformation was shown in her kindness to others. Her openness to others. Lydia's journey of discipleship comes in steps: first came her faith, then the bringing of her servants, bringing of others to Christ, then sharing her love in gracious hospitality.

Our journey of discipleship comes in a lifetime of steps too. And a hallmark of our journey is hospitality. When have you experienced radical hospitality? How did it make you feel? And then, when have you offered hospitality? How do we as church offer hospitality? Maybe it's acceptance of people for who they are: acceptance of people as God's beloved children. We don't always have to agree with each other – but we do have to listen to each other, really hear each other, respect each other, treat each other with the dignity we all deserve just because we're all created in God's image. All of us. And to offer hospitality means to offer ourselves fully to all those we meet.

And imagine what that will feel like for us: to know we're accepted and loved for who we are. What a gift that is – how that changes us, increases our self confidence, how that takes away the fear of rejection. How liberating that is! How that empowers us to grow. Isn't that what we want for ourselves? For our church? For our families?

By offering hospitality we offer an invitation – an invitation to join together in God’s mission of helping others know who they really are – children of God! Loved by God. An invitation to abandon our preoccupations with prestige, power, possessions, our worry about tomorrow and what it will bring, our worry about what others think of us – the things that get us all tangled up within ourselves.

It strikes me that these profound, yet simple, lessons in discipleship again come from an unexpected source. Last week we heard about the young boy - a child not highly valued in society at the time – it was that young boy who Andrew called on to provide the food to feed the 5,000. This week we have these lessons in discipleship from a woman – an extraordinary woman who had achieved a certain status through her business but was still marginalized by society. But she opened her home, shared her possessions, all that she had without reservation, that others would know the joy of faith that she had found. Aren’t we called to do the same?

We really know very little about Lydia – we are introduced to her in this short passage from Acts – the history book of the early church. We don’t hear about her again by name. But there’s a reason we hear about her now: the lessons she has left with us are timeless.

First – she took the Sabbath and worshipped. She listened to what Paul and Silas had to say and opened her heart to really hear, to pay attention, and to be changed by what she heard and saw. Lydia was willing to listen – are we?

Second: she allowed herself to be opened, to be transformed. Are we willing to be changed by what we hear? Are we willing to respond to what we hear? And are we willing to tell others about what we’ve heard? And are we willing to show by our daily living that we have been transformed, touched by a loving God who wants us to be the best we can be. We don’t have to give up our business dealings in the world– Lydia shows us that – but we are called to be disciples first, business people second.

Lydia’s success is not condemned here – she’s not called to give up her home, her possessions in order to be a disciple. On the contrary, she’s offered as a role model to those of us who have so much by the world’s standards: she uses what she has to bring others to Jesus. Isn’t that a profound lesson for all of us: what we have is but a means to an end – not the end itself. How do we use our richness to bring others to Jesus? To bring hospitality to others? To practice an extravagant generosity? There’s the challenge that with God’s help, we can meet.

Lydia shows us the way – my hope is that each of us will worship and learn and feel that wind of the spirit rushing through us as well – and that we will go forth confident and sure of our Lord’s presence with us, wherever we go, whatever we do. Let us continue our journey of discipleship as Lydia and so many others have done and are doing – we walk this road together. Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, come now and dwell with us as we seek your presence. Let the fresh wind of your spirit fall on us. We thank you for the example of the disciple Lydia. May we learn from her journey and may we lead others to worship you, to love you, and follow you all the days of our lives. May our church, our homes, our workplaces, our neighborhoods become places of prayer, praise, and hospitality, shaping the world around us in a way that brings you glory. Amen.