

“Lydia”
Acts 16:1-15
Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.
Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church
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In the 1939 comedy "The Marx Brothers at the Circus," Groucho introduced what would become his theme song, a musical number called “Lydia the Tattooed Lady.” It was about a woman whose abundance of tattoos told the history of the world. It began:

*O Lydia, Oh Lydia, say, have you met Lydia?
Lydia the Tattooed Lady.
She has eyes that folks adore so,
And a torso even more so.
Lydia, oh Lydia, that encyclo-pidia:
O Lydia, The Queen of Tattoo.
On her back is the Battle of Waterloo;
Beside it, “The Wreck of the Hesperus” too.
And proudly above waves the red, white, and blue.
You can learn a lot from Lydia!*

Well this morning, we ARE going to learn a lot from Lydia, not Lydia the tattooed lady but Lydia, a first century woman whose generosity of heart makes her one of the most beloved women in all the Bible. She becomes the first European Christian convert and her home may be the first gentile house that the Apostle Paul has ever entered. The great biblical scholar Sir William Ramsay declared this account to be perhaps the most remarkable story in the Book of Acts because both Western civilization and Christianity sprang from this hour.

In this morning’s text, we learn how the Apostle Paul received a vision from God. He had just inaugurated his second missionary journey, and while it was his desire to go on to Bythynia--a northern province in Asia Minor--and after that to travel on to Thessalonica and other larger cities, it seems God had OTHER plans. It was revealed to him that he was to go WESTWARD instead, in the direction of a small military outpost called Troas. It was there that he received his vision in which a man appealed for him to come over into Macedonia and help them THERE. Ever obedient to the Holy Spirit, he departed immediately for it.

I’m sure Paul intended to go northward and visit the major cities because that’s where his influence could have been most felt. Instead, the Spirit directed him to a small colony at Philippi where I’m sure he would have been further inclined to go to the local synagogue or city square where most of the people would be and where his preaching about Christ could have been most effective. Instead, he is guided to the river where on its banks a small cluster of people are holding a prayer meeting. And where he might have expected to meet influential religious and civic leaders, he instead encounters a small group of simple, humble, powerless women. At every point, Paul’s expectations are turned upside down.

While speaking to them, one person in particular seemed to show special interest in what he had to say- a woman who had recently converted to Judaism named Lydia. She apparently ran an import-export business for we are told she was a “seller of purple.” It can be assumed she was a woman of some means as purple, a dye made from shellfish, was a symbol of royalty and used exclusively by kings and the wealthy class.

Lydia had been a Gentile but then had converted to Judaism out of a sense of spiritual hunger. Disgusted and disillusioned with the evils of polytheism, she found that the monotheism of the Hebrews spoke to her inner emptiness as none of the other religions seemed to. In his discussion with her, Paul no doubt informed her that the great promise made by Jehovah to his people, the Israelites, was NOW fulfilled in the coming of his son- JESUS CHRIST. As she listened, we are told that God “opened her heart” with the result that she committed herself to Christ and, along with the rest of her household, they all were baptized.

In response to her new life in Christ, she opened her home up to the evangelists, saying to them, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay.” A little later on, we are told that her house became the home of the four missionaries, thus becoming the first “church” in Philippi and the first ever to be established on the continent of EUROPE! When Paul and Silas went on to Thessalonica, Luke continued to stay on there; and when financial help was sent to Paul, it most likely came from out of Lydia’s wealth. As one commentator has put it, “Lydia is one of the striking women who were, so to speak, the nursing mothers of the infant church. Like DORCAS, she was a woman devoted to good works; like EUNICE, she entertained the apostle; like MARY the mother of John Mark, she had a church in her house; like PRISCILLA, she ‘laboured with the apostle in the gospel.’” Lydia was thus a true practitioner of “hospitality” as there can be no clearer evidence of a new heart than the willingness to be “hospitable”- that is, to open up one’s own home and make available one’s possessions to others in need.

Some years ago, I attended the memorial service of my Uncle Stu who passed away after a short illness. He was my aunt's second husband and during the course of their fifteen-year marriage, we became great friends. In fact, the more time I spent with him, the more my love and admiration for him grew. Now I knew Stuart to be a kind and generous man, but what I learned about him from his memorial service astounded me. He was one of God’s true saints, a man whose faith in Christ was as real and deep as any person I have ever known. Like Lydia, he was never a person of great standing or high importance- just a simple businessman whose whole life was divided between his family, his church, and his work. He believed the best in everyone- a trait which made him incapable of saying a negative word about anyone. The eulogy was delivered by several family members, and the first to speak was his adopted son, Russell. As he stood before the microphone, he was so overcome by grief that it took him a full minute just to compose himself. Then with a quivering voice, he began:

My name is Russ and Stuart was my dad. No, he wasn't my biological father but he played that role in my life more than any other person. I first met him over thirty years ago, in

1971. I was a thief without a conscience; I didn't care whom I stole from. I had been kicked out of my home when the man my mother was living with threatened to kill me if I didn't leave. I dropped out of school and had no car and no job. Stuart had an auto parts store in Derry, New Hampshire, and I was hanging out around there because I didn't have anything better to do. Stuart was always talking to the customers about Jesus and when he saw me, he asked if I had thought about God recently. I said no because I didn't believe in God. He invited me to attend a picnic his church was hosting the next day, and because I knew I'd probably get a free meal out of it, I decided to go. I hated it. There, Stuart asked me if I was interested in going to church. Again, because I didn't have anything better to do, I said, "Why not." Again, I hated it. However, at the end of the service, the minister asked everyone to think seriously about their relationship to God. He said that Christ was knocking at the door of each of our hearts and if we'd only open it, he would come in and make our heart his new home. Again, because I didn't have anything better to do, I did it- I simply said, "God, come into my life and help me." After the service, Stuart hugged me and asked, since I really didn't have anywhere to go, if I wanted to move into his home with his wife and three sons. His only requirement was that I would have to find work and go back to school. He offered me a job as a driver for his auto parts business. From that day on, I was regarded as a full member of the Waldron family.

There was the night I came home from work to discover several police cars parked in the driveway. They were looking for me because of some earlier burglaries I had been involved in. They took me into custody and booked me. Stuart organized a whole group of people from the church and they all showed up at the hearing to demonstrate their love and support for me. The judge was so impressed, he let me out on my own recognizance. I later paid restitution to the families I had stolen from.

One day, Stuart came home from a church board meeting in which he had nominated me to serve as a treasurer in one of the church's organizations. What irony- that a former thief who had no regard for people's property would end up being in charge of the church's financial books. Stuart made sure that I graduated from school. I continued to live with him and his family right up until the day I got married. He taught me about love and responsibility, and because of his willingness to take risks with someone so undeserving as myself, I am now a minister of the gospel with an outreach to young people. I'm hoping to touch their lives in the same way that someone once reached out and touched mine so many years ago when I was their age. Stuart I love you, I miss you, and I look forward to the day when we shall see each other in heaven.

People like Lydia and Stu were not aberrations or special cases. The quality and depth of their love and generosity were meant to become the RULE, the STANDARD for churches EVERYWHERE and in EVERY age. They are representative of what happens within EVERY child of God, how once God has opened our heart, we can only respond by opening up our LIVES and offering our friendship and fellowship to one another. Such hospitality is the duty of ALL Christians, for it becomes the most evident witness to the love of Christ in our hearts and it testifies to our joint brotherhood and participation in the family of God.

When Ernie Waldron, Uncle Stu's son, stood to talk, he shared how his father had a large built-in swimming pool installed just so the kids in the church and the neighborhood had a place to go and to keep them out of trouble. The fact is that there are SIMILAR acts of love and charity being demonstrated by Christians and churches all around us, many of which we never hear about, and it serves as a powerful witness to Christ's presence in our midst. In a previous pastorate, we had an older couple take in a young homeless man who had recently been released from prison. He had shown up at our church's doorstep because he didn't have anywhere else to go. After church, this couple took him out for lunch. Hearing his story, they said, "We have an extra room in our home. Why don't you stay there until you can get back on your feet." He remained with them for over four months. They were a couple who worked with troubled teens and over the years had invited a number of them to come live with them so that those kids might experience what a safe and stable home is like for the first time in their lives.

When I lived in California back in the 1970's, I shared a house with a group of guys who were also preparing for the ministry. During those years, we always maintained an "open door" policy which meant we never knew who was going to stop in and spend the weekend with us from one week to the next. We had one fellow--Davey D.--drop by and he stayed with us for over THREE YEARS. Even after I got married, every Thanksgiving, Rose and I would look for stragglers, that is, those who didn't have a place to go whether they were members of the church or not. We'd make them our special guests for the day- ending up with as many as ten or twelve persons crowded around our dining room table, enjoying all the food, fellowship, and football games that came afterwards. At my church in Indiana, we had what was called "Soup & Serenity" luncheons every Thursday where a complete dinner including refreshments and dessert were offered freely to anyone who walked in off the street. Until recently, the Glenshaw Valley Presbyterian Church, where I served as interim for a couple of years, carried on the tradition of offering a Thanksgiving meal to anyone in the community free of charge. Many of us donated turkeys and other food items and we had a large number of persons come and enjoy a hot dinner with others which they might not have had OTHERWISE. You see, THAT'S what hospitality is all about.

Similar examples occur ALL THE TIME among the people of God. Such sharing and fellowship is tantamount to the sharing of one's LIFE with another. Together with clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving a drink to the thirsty, and visiting the lonely, Jesus made it one of the basic requirements of life in his kingdom. This is what he was referring to when he said "I was a stranger and you took me in" and "Whosoever receives you also receives me." The early Church was ordered to practice hospitality with the reminder that some had even entertained angels and were unaware of it.(Hebrews 13:2)

But one final thought before I end. This past week, Title 42 expired- a public health restriction put in effect three years ago that limited the number of immigrants and refugees we would allow into this country due to the covid pandemic. Well since the government has at last lifted all covid restrictions, Title 42 is no longer in effect. This has led to a massive migration of refugees from Latin America and Venezuela arriving at our southern border, overwhelming

federal immigration services and thus limiting our ability to properly address their needs. The President himself acknowledged that “it’s going to be chaotic for a while.”

Now, like you, I believe in the importance of LEGAL immigration and that it is essential we maintain strict control over our borders. I ALSO believe that when the process is circumvented by those who would enter our country illegally, then they need to be returned to their place of origin. However, what PARTICULARLY disturbs me is the rising tide of anti-immigrant fervor in our nation, much of it based on false stereotypes which promote the idea that immigrants are really grifters who can’t be trusted, that they don’t pay taxes or are seeking to steal our jobs or looking to live for free from off the back of our government. They are often derided as “rats” or “vermin” who are now invading our borders. As a result, many are subjected to insults and commanded to “go back to their OWN damn country”; some are openly attacked and EVEN KILLED- and for no other reason than being poor and possessing an accent.

These false narratives are ESPECIALLY magnified in the media but there’s little truth to them. While pastoring in Syracuse, NY, our church was at the forefront of refugee resettlement in the region and I found them to be some of the finest and hardest working people I ever met. Most were persons of faith who like Abraham were willing to leave their homes and undertake tremendous risks with no guarantees of what lay ahead for them. However, if we are to take to heart this morning’s message about hospitality and caring for the stranger, then it behooves us to at least regard and treat them—whether they’re here legally or not—with the same dignity and respect that our LORD does. After all, ARE these not children of God and thus members of the same spiritual household as OURSELVES? Thus, AS our brothers and sisters who have ALSO been created in God’s image, they possess a worth that no one can ever rob or deny them of!

Friends, our text demonstrates how God’s ways are not OUR ways. Under the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul is steered away from the great urban centers of Asia Minor only to wind up at a minor European crossroad; and once there, he is led, NOT to some palace or temple or marketplace bustling with business, but to the quiet banks of the local river; and in the shadow of that river, his audience is NOT with the rich and powerful leaders of the town but a small cluster of simple women whose ONLY qualifications were that they LOVED GOD. It is HERE that he met Lydia, the first European convert and mother of the finest congregation he ever founded. From that day forward, Paul would never stop commending them for their faith and love and would one day write to that church, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.”(Phil.1:3-5). If God could use a woman’s modest gifts to help create one of the greatest churches in the ancient world, then think of how God can use OUR gifts, REGARDLESS of how humble, to impact the lives around US; a family of faith TEEMING with Lydias which God would MOST ASSUREDLY be proud of. Let us pray...

Gracious God, we thank you for Lydia, this faithful and generous woman. Inspired by her example, may we trust that our own acts of hospitality, when done in the right spirit, can be used to glorify your Son and advance your kingdom. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.