

On this Mothers' Day, it is fitting that we hear a Scripture about a woman – a woman who may have been a literal mother of children, a woman who was almost certainly a spiritual mother to the first Christian church in Europe. It's also worth noting, however, that the story of this woman is quite a radical story of inclusion in the earliest history of the Church. There are lessons here for us, not only concerning honoring the place of women in our families and in our faith, but also lessons about how people with whom we would least expect to be in fellowship may become dear and significant friends and co-workers for Christ. The story of Lydia is a reminder to us that no one whom God sets in our path should be dismissed as unsuitable on the basis of who they are or who we think they are.

The story of Paul's first missionary foray into Europe is one of unlikely success from the start. He is summoned in a dream by a vision of a Macedonian man asking for his help. It would seem, however, that Paul and his fellow missionaries, Silas, Luke, and (possibly) Timothy, had no contacts to help them get established in Macedonia. They traveled to Philippi, but Luke records that they were there several days before they even found an audience. When they did, it was not in a synagogue, where they usually began their work in a new city. Apparently, there were not even ten Jewish men in Philippi, a minyan, the number needed for communal prayer. Instead, all they found was a group of women, who had, in the words of the old song, gone "down to the river to pray."

Now, this was not an unusual place for people to gather outside a city for prayer and worship. Luke tells us, in fact, that they had expected to find a place of prayer by the river outside the gates. Why would this be? Well, certainly, women and household slaves would have needed to go to the river for water, perhaps to wash clothes. It was a natural gathering place. But there are also traditions of God's people seeking the banks of the river to worship away from the ridicule or prohibition of non-believers. We know the great lament of Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion." It's a haunting image that has reached our time both in a beautiful folk song, recorded by Don McLean and others, and in the moving ballad in the rock musical "Godspell," "On the Willows." In addition to this Old Testament witness to the practice of groups gathering for worship by rivers, we also have archaeological evidence that points us to the reason for the gathering Paul and friends found. In their commentary on Acts, Bruce Barton and Grant Osborne report, "inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city. This may explain why there was a Jewish prayer meeting being held outside the city, on the riverbank." It doesn't seem like a very auspicious way to begin a mission in a new country, however, to first preach to a group who were denied the comfort of worshipping together within the city limits.

This first audience of Paul's in Europe is a group literally on the fringes. And, to make matters worse, it was a group of women. I think we all know how very few rights and what very low status women generally held in the first century Greco-Roman world. As an observant Jewish man and a Pharisee, Paul would have been long trained not to interact with these women at all. Warren Wiersbe quotes a rabbinic saying contemporary with Paul: "It is better that the words of the Law be burned than be delivered to a woman." These women weren't even real Jews, apparently, but only Gentile converts or "God-fearers". Luke says of Lydia, that she was "a worshipper of God," not a Jew, and from Thyatira in Asia Minor, not from Judea or Galilee or,

for that matter, from Macedonia. A woman, on the fringes of society due to her religion, which wasn't even a full Judaism, and as foreign to Greece as they were. What sort of convert could this be? Paul, it seems, would have been justified in throwing up his hands and asking God, "Where is that Macedonian man you put in my dream?"

But things are not as bleak as they seem. If there was any way for a woman to gain clout in public affairs in that time, it was through wealth, whether inherited or earned in business. Successful businesswomen were not unknown in the Roman world. In the ancient city of Herculaneum, the "other" city besides Pompeii buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and, incidentally, the namesake of my father's hometown in Missouri, one of the largest buildings excavated by archaeologists was a businesswomen's club that would have been thriving at the time of our story. It was possible for a woman to become wealthy in business. And Lydia, apparently, was quite wealthy. Luke tells us she was a dealer in purple cloth. Purple dye was rare and expensive – that is why purple was considered to be a royal color. Lydia's clientele would have been the cream of Philippian society. In its own way, this is another unexpected turn for the spread of the Gospel. Jesus' message of Good News for the poor, spread among impoverished rural farmers and fishermen, is now reaching the well-to-do merchant class.

Lydia is quite a radical character in her own way. Relegated to the fringes of society by her gender, her religion and her nationality, she is an unlikely leader in the young Christian movement for much the same reasons. Yet she clearly had important access in society due to her wealth, her trade and her business acumen. She was a compelling enough personality that, whether through the movement of their own hearts or through their love or loyalty for Lydia, her entire household was baptized by Paul. Her nurture of her servants, slaves, and children, if any, extended to their spiritual lives. Luke says she prevailed upon Paul and his party to move into her house, again a socially risky and unusual move for Paul. Yet by the end of Paul's stay in Philippi, it is to her house he retreats after his sojourn in prison and it is at Lydia's house where all the new Philippian believers gather.

It can't have been easy to have convinced Paul to make his base of operations in the house of a Gentile woman. As I said before, it must have gone against years of training and belief, but Paul, thanks be to God, was continually learning and then teaching that our God is no respecter of boundaries erected by humans, whether they be tied to race, status, gender or any other human distinction. And even Paul was not immune to falling back into old, sinful habits as he plainly confesses in his letter to the Romans. Depending on your stance on the authorship of all the letters attributed to Paul, this is, after all, the man who wrote to Timothy, "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent," and, to the Corinthians, "women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church." I will not take the time today to attempt to unpack or apologize for those passages. Perhaps Paul wrote those things because he didn't know the women involved. It's always easier to be suspicious of or negative about those we do not know. But Paul knew Lydia. Actions speak louder than words and by the end of Paul's time in Philippi, he is clearly comfortable with Lydia as the de facto leader of the new mission church. It is likely that the Christians continued to meet at Lydia's home and, as Paul expresses in his letter to them, they are one of his favorite communities. "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 (at the riverbank) until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus." If Paul had as much problem with women in leadership as many attribute to him, it's unlikely that he could have written such words to a church with such strong feminine leadership.

As much as God began a new and good work that day on the riverbank among Lydia and her household and the other women gathered there that spread among the citizens of Philippi and into Europe, I think God also began a new work in Paul. Writing of that day, the Rev. Kirk Kubicek says, "All distinctions of clean and unclean, acceptable and unacceptable are passing away. Healing is indeed taking place, down by the river." Paul learned to accept this unclean, unacceptable Gentile woman as a co-worker in the Good News of Christ and to treasure the community she helped to found.

Both the psalmist whose work was adapted for our Call to Worship this morning and the author of the last book in our Bible could foresee the holy end of such universal acceptance by God and God's people. Psalm 67 asks for God's saving power to be felt in all nations of the earth, so that all peoples may praise God. And in the 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> chapters of Revelation, John records the vision of the New Jerusalem, the ultimate destiny of humankind. "The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations."

I am going this afternoon to sit with Jewish, Muslim and Sikh brothers and sisters to talk about the justice that God calls all of God's people to champion, about the Good News to the poor and release to the captives and the love of God, which we are called to extend to our neighbors. As I have prepared for that event, I've been thinking what a mark of God's grace it is that such an unlikely gathering should be happening here in post-9/11 America. Our nation's leaders, in deed if not in word, continue to tell us that the Muslim world is unclean, unacceptable, even evil. Muslims and Jews continue to seek each other's destruction in the Middle East and Muslims and Sikhs continue to be pitted against each other in violence in the Punjab. But this afternoon, representatives of all four faiths will gather to consider how God requires us to interact with each other and with our fellows. It is a small beacon of hope in a world at war.

In light of that event and of the story of Paul and Lydia, I am reminded that God calls us to continually expand our own boundaries concerning who we will accept and who we will not, who we will love as sisters and brothers and who we will shun, to always be listening to Jesus' answer to the question "Who is my neighbor?" In answer to that question, Jesus told the story that we know as "The Good Samaritan" and when he had finished, he turned the question back on his questioner. "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" The lawyer said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to

him, ‘Go and do likewise.’” No matter what the boundaries of nationality or creed or gender or anything else by which we divide humanity, we are called to show mercy to all we meet. With the new eyes of love, given to us by the Spirit of God Who is Love, we are called to look on all humankind as our neighbors, as our brothers and sisters, and to walk together with them as we journey in the way of Jesus. May our hearts be open to the work of the Spirit who guides us in love. Amen.