

**“The Lydias in Our Lives”**  
**Acts 16:11-15**

Fifth Sunday in Easter – May 14, 2006

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

There are mothers who are immensely creative and their homes display their handiwork. They are the moms who cane chairs or make their own window treatments or paint murals in the nursery.

There are mothers whose meals are better than Prozac for calming everybody down. Their macaroni and cheese can take the edge off the worst kind of day. Their kitchens smell of homemade soup and chocolate chip cookies. They have a couple of “greatest hits” they pull out for special occasions – meals that feed the stomach and the soul.

There are mothers who spend enormous amounts of energy preparing their children to leave the nest. They teach their children how to tie their shoes and comb their hair, how to read and write, how to fold towels and mow the grass, how to balance a check book and drive a car.

There are mothers who teach compassion and kindness. There are mothers who pass along family history and traditions. There are mothers who instill a love for art and music and politics and literature. There are mothers who do many of these things.

But today, I want to tell you about a mother who taught her whole household about God.
--

*There was “a certain woman named Lydia.”* Actually, it’s possible that her name was not Lydia, but she was called “Lydia” because she was from the country called Lydia in western Asia Minor. Specifically, she was from the city of Thyatira, but in this story, she was sitting about 300 miles from her hometown, on the banks of the Gangites River<sup>1</sup> just outside the city of Philippi.<sup>2</sup>

Phillipi was a popular trading center with quite a bit of religious diversity. You would find people who worshipped the emperor.<sup>3</sup> You would find people worshipping the Egyptian gods.<sup>4</sup> And you would find a handful of Jews.

When Paul and his companions traveled on their missionary journeys, the first place he would visit was always the local synagogue. He wanted the Jews to hear the

---

<sup>1</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprint, 1987), p. 267.

<sup>2</sup> Philip II of Macedon named this city for himself in 356 BCE/BC. Philip was the father of Alexander the Great. It’s believed that Paul first visited this ancient city during his second missionary journey in about 49 CE/AD.

<sup>3</sup> Julius, Augustus, or Claudius

<sup>4</sup> Isis, Serapis

Good News of Jesus first. But according to this story, Paul didn't go to a synagogue; he went to the river just outside the city gate.

It took ten Jewish men to form a proper synagogue<sup>5</sup>, and perhaps there were not yet enough Jewish men to form a synagogue in Philippi. With no synagogue available, Paul went looking for a place to pray on the Sabbath day, and there by the river, he found a group of women. And Lydia was one of them.

Now Lydia is a Gentile name, so if she was Jewish, Lydia probably converted to Judaism back in Thyatira. She had come to Philippi – along the central east-west trade route – to conduct her trade.

Lydia sold purple goods – a very prosperous business in those days. Purple was a rare dye found in very few places and the wealthiest citizens would pay handsomely for purple linen and wool. She had surely moved to Philippi in order to bolster her business much like a German importer might move to Palm Springs to sell Mercedes-Benz automobiles, or a South African importer might relocate to Beverly Hills to sell diamonds.

Lydia had moved from Thyatira – which was, and still is to this day, known for its purple dyes<sup>6</sup> -- to Philippi where she would import and sell her cloth to wealthy Europeans.

And Lydia was not only a female entrepreneur; she was also the head of her family. Normally men – of course – were considered heads of their families. But if there was no husband or father, then the household was headed by the oldest woman. Lydia's household would have included her children, her unmarried sisters, and her slaves. And when she came to believe in Jesus – by virtue of her position as head of household – not only was *she* baptized but her whole household was baptized as well.

////

As you know, there are Christians who believe that baptism is for all ages, even for infants. And there are those who believe baptism is reserved only for those who can make a personal profession of faith for themselves. (Baptists, among others, hold to this belief.)

This is one of the passages that proponents of infant baptism lift up to support their understanding of Christian doctrine. These Christians hold that the children of believers – by virtue of their parents' faith – can be welcomed into God's family in hopes that one day those children will grow up to make a personal profession of faith for themselves. We call this confirmation – confirming the promises that parents made for them as young children.

---

<sup>5</sup> A "minyan" is ten Jewish males in Orthodox Judaism.

<sup>6</sup> Thyatira is now called Akhisar, in western Turkey. Among the ruins, inscriptions have been found relating to the guild of dyers in that city in ancient times.

We don't know how much time passed between the time Lydia listened to Paul's teaching and converted to Christianity, and the time Lydia and her family were baptized. But we do know that she was one of the founding members of the church in Philippi – the very first Christian Church in Europe.

Lydia supported this church with her money and with her hospitality. She invited Paul and his companions into her home.

She was one of those mothers who passed on spiritual faith to her children. For that matter, she passed it on to the whole community.

////

Last Tuesday, there was an article in *The Washington Post* about parents who do not have any spiritual faith themselves, but they want their children to have some grounding in moral and spiritual beliefs. Maybe you saw it.

One mother, who joined a local Lutheran church, said that she herself doesn't believe the prayers she prays during worship, but she still wants to give her children the "mental health balm" of church. She likes the routine that Sunday worship gives her family, even though she admits that she just doesn't "get it" herself, in terms of the whole "God thing."<sup>7</sup>

Another mother who calls herself an agnostic and has been taking her 8 year old daughter to a Unitarian Sunday School, says that while her daughter doesn't believe in God any more than she does, the daughter does have enough information about God to hold her own in playground discussions. It seems that the 8 year old was being persecuted by classmates who insisted that she is going to "burn in hell" for her lack of faith.<sup>8</sup>

I found this article disturbing on a couple of levels.

First of all, anyone teaching children that it's okay to condemn other children for what they do or don't believe apparently haven't noticed that no one in the Bible has ever come to believe in God because they were attacked or excluded. If we hope to share our faith, condemning our neighbors won't do it.

---

<sup>7</sup> Stacy Weiner, "A Leap of Faith" *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, May 9, 2006. See: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/08/AR2006050801012\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/08/AR2006050801012_pf.html)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

But about the parents who don't have faith and yet want their children exposed (so they'll have something to reject as young adults, one parent said), my response is this:

We live in a hectic, scattered culture. And I can see how parents would find a hour of quiet reflection attractive, whether they believed in God or not. There is value in giving children cosmic security, in learning how to talk with them about such things as "what happens to Grandma after she dies" or where the stars and moon came from."

But this is not the abundant life that Paul was teaching on the riverside in Philippi. This is not the message of justice and divine love that Jesus lived.

This sounds more like a weak substitute, a short-lived fantasy that gets kids through the boogie-man years but leaves them spiritually bereft when life really gets dicey as teenagers and young adults, when they have to make Big Life Decisions like:

- What or who will I will worship in life: *My mentor? Money? Power? God?*
- Why are we alive in the first place? *An accident of nature? Because of some eternal purpose?*
- What makes me valuable: *The clothes I wear? The kind of car I drive? Because of the friends I hang out with? The degree I've earned? Because I belong to God?*
- How can I survive heartbreak, overcome hardships, find peace in a hostile world? *Alcohol? Pills? Working myself into a frenzy? Prayerful intimacy with Someone who gives me an eternal perspective?*
- How am I going to live my life? *Running over everybody on my way to the top? For only myself and the ones I love best? For the greater good?*

Faith is a mystery and we cannot control who does and does not have it. We can't make our children or our partners or our friends have faith.

But we can be **real** about our own faith. We can go to God ourselves. We can share our own spiritual needs.

And one of our needs is *spiritual*. Lydia had a lot going for her: a good business, a prayer life. But there was something missing that she took time to explore for herself.

We are told that Lydia listened eagerly to what Paul had to say about Jesus. I'm assuming that it wasn't some canned sermon that Paul half-heartedly shared. I'm assuming it was not a superficial message. There are many superficial messages out there. When I listen to some television preachers talk about Jesus – it sometimes sounds so canned, so fake – it amazes me that anyone has faith.

What Lydia heard and what she wanted her family to hear was real and life-altering. Paul revealed something to her that changed her life.

And it was passed on and shared with her household and with enough people to form at least seven churches in the city of Philippi by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

There are mothers who warm our hearts with their cooking and others who warm our hearts with their wisdom. But I want us to remember today the women who mothered us by sharing a genuine and loving faith. Maybe they were grandmothers or teachers or neighbors. Maybe, like Lydia, they were professional women we admired who taught us that the best thing in their lives was not their profession.

There are different kinds of women who teach us different kinds of things. But the women who teach us spiritual things – those women help give us faith.

Whether we are literally mothers or not, whether we are women or men, we live in a world in which we need to stop at least for a moment each day – not only to address our own spiritual needs, but also to pay attention to the spiritual needs of the people around us – especially the children.

*Who will tell them that they are loved even if they fail, even if they feel alone, even if they are rejected by the rest of the world?*

**God put himself in a position to know what that's like.**

So today we thank God for all mothers. But especially we thank God for the mothers who taught us faith, by their actions and their words. Thanks be to God for the Lydias in our lives.

**Let us pray:**

God of grace and steadfast love – for those who have prayed for us, for those who have taught us to pray we thank you. Bless the women and the memories of women who have mothered us through our years. And grant that we – men and women together – might find our hearts opened to receive a faith that makes a difference. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.