

“A Woman of the Cloth”

John 14: 23-29, Acts of the Apostles 16: 9-15

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Where would I be, as a woman in ministry without....Paul? I bet you thought I would say Lydia. Perhaps she is the more obvious choice given the lesson we just heard. I know there are many examples in Paul's letters where he seems to be less than supportive of women, in ~~the~~ ministry or otherwise. However, today we have many reasons to be thankful for Paul. Without his willingness to respond God's call to go to Macedonia we would not have the chance to meet Lydia. He lived by the great commission, to bring the gospel to the ends of the earth. When we meet Paul in today's story he is frustrated. He and the other disciples receive a message by the Spirit that they are not to go to Asia to spread the gospel as they had intended. They must instead go to Macedonia, the area we would today know as Europe. Paul receives a vision of a Macedonian man pleading for his help. Where God closes one door, another door opens. So, with a renewed sense of mission and zeal, Paul and the disciples head for Macedonia.

When they arrive in Macedonia, they wait until the Sabbath to find a community where they can share their message. In a gathering of worshippers by the river they meet a woman named Lydia. This riverside congregation is made up mostly of women. Lydia is a businesswoman, a dealer of purple cloth. We do not know if she is married or has any children. She appears to be wealthy and well respected. She commands authority from the members of her household, bringing each of them to be baptized with her.

Paul and Lydia share an important characteristic of discipleship: a willing heart. Paul is willing to listen to the Spirit's leading and change his own plans in favor of God's plans. He has become an eager disciple. Lydia is ready to be converted. She has heard about this new religious movement and all it takes is a personal encounter with Jesus' followers for her to become a true believer.

Paul and the other disciples learned that God's plans do not always coincide with their plans. Sometimes we respond to a call not fully understanding why. When God closes one door, another door opens. Paul was not sure

what he would find in Macedonia. To be honest, when I answered the call to minister in Glastonbury, I did not know what I would find here. I thought I was abandoning my desire to do urban ministry. However, here I am, nearly five years later. I have come to understand that God's ways are not always my ways. God has had other plans for me too. When one door closes, another door opens. It was not a mistake to come here and it was not a mistake for the disciples to change course and head to Macedonia as they did.

Why Macedonia? Sometimes the people most receptive to hear the Good News are in the least likely places. In many cases God sends us to the fringes, to places like Malawi or North Dakota or Washington, DC to spread the Good News. Sometimes God sends us to preach the Good News not to those who are comfortable, but to those who are struggling, to find their voice, to find their way, perhaps even to find hope in the midst of their struggles. Paul finds such a group of mostly women on the banks of the river.

Paul does not go to Macedonia by accident. He makes this detour because God sends him there. Lydia is a member of this fringe faith community, but she is eager to hear God's word in a new way. Many converts to the faith in the early church were Jews. However, to receive the Word of God and to believe in the risen Christ, one has to have an open heart and a willing spirit. Lydia possesses both. This is her conversion story. There is a very distinct process of conversion that is outlined in this story. One's conversion begins with an open heart. Having been "strangely warmed" as our brother John Wesley used to say, she responds by receiving the sacrament of baptism. She brings her whole household to be baptized with her. After being baptized, Lydia invites Paul and the others to her home to receive the gift of hospitality.

Tony Robinson teaches that conversion is not passing from sin or immorality to uprightness, but from ignorance to understanding. Lydia's conversion tells us not only something about her, but something also about God. Robinson says, "This is a God who crosses boundaries, to women, to a wealthy and independent woman and boundaries and barriers of cultural differences." In order for people to believe in Jesus, in order for the early church to flourish, the disciples had to cross many boundaries. They were crossing a boundary by taking their ministry as far away as Macedonia. Ministry, in all its forms, requires disciples to possess a open heart and a

willingness to receiving God's vision. Faith means nothing unless you are willing to do something. Sometimes your response is simple, at others times, it is literally life altering.

So we make a big show of our faith, insisting that we are following God's will when our actions say something different. It is not easy to seek and to follow God's will. When we do, we give our control over to God. Then we must resist the temptation to argue or bargain or rationalize with God about what God would have us to go or do. To fully submit to God's will, we must be willing to make mistakes and to acknowledge the true source of any successes. "Not my will, but thy will be done" as we pray together each week. We define *success* in a whole new way, not as the world defines it, by numbers or the wealth we might generate, but as God defines it. Finally, we celebrate, the small victories and the big ones, the few and many conversions.

If Lydia were the only one to be baptized that day would Paul's ministry in Macedonia have been a success? Indeed it would. How many times have we heard someone say, after overcoming their own struggle with addiction or making their way through a very difficult situation that if telling their story can help just one person, then it was worth telling. The same was true for these early disciples. No matter where they went, if only one heart was moved and only one person came to believe, then the journey was worth making. Paul understood that he was the vessel through which God would bring others to believe.

It is not possible to receive God's love and not then share that love with others. After all, the greatest commandment is to love one another as God has loved us. Even before Lydia was baptized she lived by this commandment. Perhaps that is why it was so easy for her to believe. God was already at work in her life and this was just another step along that journey. In her encounter with Paul, Lydia found words and substance and structure to what she already believed.

It is often strong, courageous women that lead us to our own conversion, from ignorance to understanding. We had the privilege of meeting three such women this week. Their names are Ranya, Suzanne and Priscilla. Together they formed what they called, "the Faith Club." Ranya is a Muslim, Suzanne a Christian, and Priscilla a Jew. Following the attacks on September 11th they wanted to write a children's book to help them explain

their three faiths to their children. They admitted their own ignorance about each other's tradition and wanted to know more. There was a sense of immediacy about this, as if their children's lives depended upon it. It was a painful and difficult time. They formed this holy alliance and began to meet in each other's homes in New York City. What emerged was a book called "The Faith Club: A Muslim, A Christian, A Jew---Three Women Search for Understanding." It was a holy journey.

These women did not seek to convert the other to their own faith. They believed their three traditions held more in common than they may have realized. It was this presumption that fueled their conversations. They chose not to speak to the "experts;" the seminary professors, rabbis, clergypersons or imans. They were seeking more than knowledge. They longed for community. They wanted to share with another woman, another mother the joys and the struggles of their faith. They wanted another person to hear how their faith sustained them, what stereotypes others held of them that angered them, what confused or confounded them. Having to share this with someone else, who was not of their own faith, led them to reflect more critically and lovingly, to think of things differently, in the hopes that his would help them share this with their friends. It became a holy journey, one which they are now privileged to share with others.

These women were very courageous. There were times when they could have easily given up, when they could have written a children's book and ignored their own journey. Through their perseverance and strength they have changed many more lives. God journeyed with each of them to a place that was perhaps more frightening, but in the end life giving for them all. They worked through the struggles and the temptation to give up. Like their ancestor in the faith Lydia, they possessed willing hearts and a compulsion to create community based on love, compassion and trust. It did not matter that they did not share the same faith. In fact, perhaps this is what made this alliance holy.

Lives are changed whenever we share our stories. That is why I appreciate the invitation to be part of the confirmation classes' faith statement conferences. What a gift it is to hear what people believe. Such witnessing, such stories have the power to change the world. This is the legacy of Lydia. This is the legacy of Paul and those early disciples. They went wherever God sent them, not to impart their knowledge about Jesus to others, but to plant seeds, to take advantage of open hearts, to invite others to

form holy alliances and to honor the work of the Holy Spirit alive in those who were once strangers. The Faith Club, where might it meet next? Only the Spirit knows. May it be so! Amen