

Lydia: Called to Serve

Acts 16:11-15, 40

¹¹ We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

⁴⁰ After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

1 Corinthians 1:26-30

²⁶ Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what

is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Theme Statement

Lydia used her gifts and her place in society to support Paul's ministry and the growth of the church. We too are called to serve others joyfully through whatever means are at our disposal.

Exploring the Word

This quarter we have examined God's call in stories from the New Testament. Of course, the greatest call came to Jesus. Everything he said, did, and became was shaped by that call. Other calls in the New Testament led to the extension of Christian ministry into the known world. We have also in the past few weeks celebrated the call to ministry of several women. Our thirteen-session study ends with the call of Lydia, a businesswoman who used her resources to facilitate the first church in Europe. Her story is not the final example of living out one's call as a disciple of Jesus. That is an ongoing process for people in every generation.

Acts 16:11-15, 40 Faith finds a home

In Old and New Testament times, purple was an expensive dye to use. Because of that, purple clothing was worn only by people of high social rank. The color became associated with the wealth and power of royalty. As "a dealer in purple cloth," Lydia was in a unique position to contribute

to the development of the early church. Who Lydia was as a person was also instrumental to this critical phase of the Jesus movement.

Lydia was probably a wealthy and influential businesswoman in Philippi who was also a worshiper of God. She met Paul when he came to the place of prayer near the river. His normal practice was to go to the synagogue, but there was none in Philippi. This meant that there were not ten Jewish men and women who would gather to establish the faith community. This didn't stop Lydia. She and several others met regularly to practice their faith (v. 13).

The writer makes sure we know that Lydia's conversion was not the result of Paul's eloquence. Her open heart was due to the work of God (v. 14).

We know that Luke often lifted up the faith of women, even though socially they were of low status. Lydia, even though she was influential and wealthy, was still a woman. But we know that none of those things mattered to God.

Immediately after Lydia's baptism, she invited Paul and Silas to stay in her home (v. 15). Her hospitality led the Christian church in Philippi (the first one in Europe) to start meeting in her home.

While in Philippi, Paul and Silas ended up in prison over a complaint by a local vendor. When they were miraculously freed, they returned to the home of Lydia to encourage the believers gathered there before leaving Philippi (v. 40).

I Corinthians 1:26-30 Bringing it home

Paul and Silas's return to Lydia's house after their time in the Philippian jail is an affirmation of Lydia living out her call to be a person of hospitality and welcome, providing a place for the church to gather and pray. Paul may have remembered this example of humility and service in his

letter to the Corinthians. He called them to the life of discipleship and service.

This call was not to a limited few. The qualifications were quite different from those most would look for in a leader. Human wisdom was not a requisite, nor was social status. In fact, God's preference was for those who were not what the world was looking for, but rather for those from whom it expected very little. These are the ones who would be able to change the world only through the power of God at work in them.

Paul said that was their call, their divinely given purpose in this life. It was not something they chose but was chosen for them. It was not something they powered; rather, they were empowered by God.

The Word Today

Lydia, the businesswoman who heard the gospel from Paul and as a Christian was instrumental in establishing the church in Philippi, could have lived a good life on her own. She had the influence, social standing, and resources that few enjoyed. Yet, she was a faithful worshiper whose heart was tuned to God. And as her faith was informed, she moved with the Spirit and exercised her call by using what she had been given to help others grow in faith.

This is consistent with what Mark wrote about call in his gospel: "And [Jesus] appointed twelve, whom he also named apostles, to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mark 3:14-15).

To be called is, first, to be with Jesus and, second, to do something for God's realm. The order is important. Being with Jesus empowers and equips us to do what God wants

us to do. If we reverse the sequence, we may try to do something for God, but that seldom works out. Remember: God acts, and we respond.

The realm of God is built through those whom God calls. As they are devoted to God, their gifts and talents are the means by which God draws others to God's own self.

As faithful disciples, we "go beyond" in offering our own gifts. We offer them not only to God but also to others, so that they may know, love, and serve Jesus Christ. This "going beyond" offering appears when we welcome those God brings across our path and use our resources to undergird their ministry. It means we watch for their gifts and talents and joyfully receive them so they can experience growth in faith.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Where do you experience hospitality that makes you want to come back?
2. What do you think is the strongest hospitality practice in your congregation?

Exploring the Word

1. Consider how Luke's inclusion of both male and female voices would inform the following audiences of his time:

Men

Women

Religious leaders

Those on the margins of society

2. What characteristics might Lydia have possessed that empowered her to stand up to the prevailing culture and go against it?
3. Paraphrase 1 Corinthians 1:26-30 using words that an elementary-school-age student would understand.

The Word Today

1. How can you joyfully use the gifts God has given you to serve others?
2. In what ways might you acknowledge others' gifts and encourage them to use their gifts?

Closing Prayer

O God, in your love you have given the people of this land gifts of abundance beyond what our forebears knew or could imagine. Mercifully grant that we may not be so occupied with material things that we forget spiritual gifts, and thus, even though we have gained the whole world, lose our souls; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 80)

Further Study

Philippians 1:1-11; Paul's gratitude for Lydia's ministry

Daily Readings

M. 1 Peter 4:7-11

T. Romans 12:9-19

W. Acts 16:35-40

T. 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:9-10

F. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

S. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

S. Acts 16:11-15, 40;

1 Corinthians 1:26-30

Memorization

Acts 16:15

When [Lydia] and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.