

Lydia: Called to Serve
February 28, 2021
Acts 16: 11-15, 40; 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

We come to the last lesson of this quarter with a focus on Lydia of Philippi, who is particularly known as the Apostle Paul's first European Christian convert. There is a lot going on that is very interesting and significant in this short passage in Acts. You may recall that Paul and his traveling companions, Silas, Timothy and Luke, took ship and came to Philippi only because, in a vision, Paul saw a Macedonian calling, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." (Acts 16:6-10) So Paul and his companions went. Notice that here in Acts Luke does not explicitly mention himself as being present, but he uses the first person plural pronoun. That starts right here in this passage. This is how we can know when, in Acts, Luke is with Paul. The fact that he witnessed the events we are studying himself, in person, gives additional confidence in his account.

Philippi was an unusual town. Luke calls it "the leading city of Macedonia." But, Thessalonica was the capitol of the Roman province of Macedonia. Amphipolis was generally acknowledged as more important. What was unique about Philippi was that it was, as Luke tells us, a Roman colony. Maybe that is why the Philippians, or at least Luke, considered their city as "first." Was Luke from Philippi? We don't know; it's not completely unlikely. Maybe he's showing pride in his home town. A different interpretation says Philippi was of the first district of Macedonia, which is technically accurate. Macedonia was divided that way, and indeed Philippi was in the first district.

Philippi was originally an insignificant town, but Philip of Macedon (Alexander the Great's father) had fortified it, and gave it his name. It was the site of the battle, on "The Planes of Philippi," of Octavian and Anthony versus Brutus and Cassius in 42 B.C., a famous scene in Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar*. Octavian, (later Emperor Augustus) then enlarged the city, and made Philippi a Roman colony. In 30 B.C. Octavian forced certain families and soldiers who had been loyal to Antony to leave Italy; they were settled in Philippi. The city could be thought of as a miniature Rome. Roman law applied, as if the city was in Italy. That explains some unusual language is used in Acts 16. The word "police" refers to Roman "*lictors*," and the magistrates are "*pratores*," Roman terms rather than Greek for those offices. Paul was himself a Roman citizen.

This is too important: Roman women had considerable freedom and independence. Yes, the head of a Roman family, the “*pater familias*” exercised absolute power within his family. But an independent woman with no father or husband to answer to could be important and powerful. That seems to have been the case for Lydia.

Usually, in a new town, Paul would go to the synagogue. But he didn’t in Philippi. Apparently there wasn’t one. A quorum of ten men was necessary to have a synagogue, and it would seem that Philippi lacked that number. So, where do you look for the Jews if there is no synagogue? Luke tells us in verse 13. **“On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; ...”** The word used as “place of prayer”, *prosenuhn*, is sometimes used as a synonym for synagogue by Josephus and Philo. It would seem to be an actual structure, rather than just a nice plot of grass near the river as I tended to picture it in my mind. Having water near at hand was important for Jewish synagogues and places of prayer because of the ritual washing required in Judaism. Often synagogues were sited near a river or other water source. Perhaps Paul was looking for the synagogue near the river where he expected it to be. He found it, but instead, it was a “place of prayer,” sort of an unofficial synagogue.

The next remarkable thing is who was in this place of prayer. As verse 13 continues, “... and we sat down and spoke to the women who were gathered there.” The women? No men? Wouldn’t Luke have said so if any men were present? It would seem that just women were present, until Paul and his traveling companions came in. Isn’t this remarkable! So, Paul talked with the women there. We don’t know how many there were. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul gives us two other names of women in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, who were later in some sort of disagreement, but who were important in the work of the church.

Of these, Lydia was apparently a “God-fearer.” Luke uses the words, “a worshiper of God.” He would have said so if she was Jewish. Lydia was one of many Gentiles who came to respect and believe in the Jewish God and Jewish teaching. The “God-fearers” had stopped short of becoming proselytes, converts, to Judaism. It is among such God-fearers that Paul found his first Gentile converts to Christianity. Only later were there more numerous converts from the larger Gentile world, that included many recent pagans not already acquainted with Judaism. Many of these God-fearers supported synagogues generously, as has been seen from inscriptions found by archaeologists in the ancient world in that

vicinity. Much like those seen in our church, on stained glass windows and elsewhere. God-fearers leaving the synagogues to join Christian churches would have had a financial impact that could cause additional friction with the Jews.

Lydia is not only the name Luke gives us for this woman, but she was also from Lydia, the place, a district of the Roman province of “Asia,” north of Ephesus. Lydia was from Thyatira, a town in Lydia. It is possible Luke’s use of Lydia means “of Lydia,” and she had another name. But, the name Lydia is also relatively common. A prominent woman of that name is known from that time in Ephesus, for example. It was also not uncommon for a freed slave to take the name of the city or district he or she was from. But whatever her origin, Lydia had by this time obviously attained considerable wealth.

Lydia was a seller of “purple.” Our translation says “purple cloth,” but being a seller of purple dye is also possible, though less probable. Thyatira was famous for its dyes made from the madder root, ranging in color from orange to a deep burgundy. The color is known as “Turkish Red” today. Dyes and cloth of that color was much less expensive than those of “Tyrian purple” made from a mollusk found in the area of Tyre (in Lebanon today). Lydia was a seller, or merchant, and had her home in Philippi. She may have imported both sorts of purple. She may have been a member of a trade organization based in Lydia. Interestingly, I read an account that remarked, “Many purple dye merchants in Rome were freed women...” Independent women were also known as sellers of other luxury goods.

It may not have been possible for a woman to become an important merchant elsewhere, but Lydia must have been a “Romanized” Greek (origin) woman. In Philippi she enjoyed the same benefits of status as women did in Rome. In verse 15, Lydia and her whole household were baptized, and she invited Paul and his companions to stay at her house, all without mention of checking first with some male authority in her life. No husband is mentioned. We don’t know if she was a widow, or perhaps divorced. But, clearly she takes the initiative, and despite not being a Jew herself, participated eagerly with Paul and the others at the place of prayer. The fact that Lydia was a dealer in purple, had her own rather large home, had an extended “household,” and apparently supported Paul elsewhere, indicates considerable wealth. Being a dealer of purple required considerable capital. Having her own home, and big enough to welcome Paul and his companions to stay in addition to her “household,” showed unusual wealth.

The Philippian Church for Paul was generous in support of Paul, even to Rome. They were generous in gifts to the saints at Jerusalem. Lydia must have been a prime mover. Paul's letter to the Philippians from Rome is one of the most joyful writings of the New Testament, despite Paul's condition at the time. The messenger Epaphroditus, mentioned in *Philippians*, had apparently recently brought help to Paul as he writes (Philippians 2:25, 4:18). See also 4:15, concerning how the Philippians supported Paul in Thessalonica. It is a mystery that Paul does not include greetings to Lydia specifically in the letter, as he did mention Prisca and Aquila in those other letters.

The lesson book focuses on Lydia's hospitality. It was gracious of her to invite Paul and his companions to stay with her. But, it was more than that. It was at personal risk to herself. This was a Roman colony, and Paul was preaching faith in this new divinity, Jesus, who was not the emperor, or one of the other approved Roman pagan gods. Bringing Paul into her house would perhaps have risked her home and her business. It's possible that hosting these four men would have been damaging to her reputation. But Lydia assumed those risks. Even after Paul and his companions were discharged from prison, she hosted them at her house before they left Philippi. That is courage.

I see the last part of today's scripture, from 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, as a conclusion to this quarter's study of calling and of faith. I include it here:

1 Corinthians 1:26 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.

Paul, talking to the members of his church in Corinth, reminds them of their calling. This letter opens with a statement of his own calling, **“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, ...”** Paul is reminding them that despite their different talents, or gifts, as he puts it, and differences in background, each has a calling by God. Being wealthy or full of the world's wisdom is not a prerequisite.

To be recognized as a scholar or philosopher in Athens requires being full of that worldly wisdom and then some, perhaps noble birth, or wealth, to validate one's status. That's not how God works. God reaches out to all, including those who are weak, of low birth, of questionable background, and of low repute. Indeed, these who God calls are a sign of his universal love for all, a love that Paul builds up to as he discusses the problems faced by the Corinthian church, especially the problem of factions, culminating with that magnificent Chapter 13.

We have studied the call and the responses of various early characters of the New Testament, including these various women during the last month, as well as Jesus himself. All responded to God's call, though in different ways. Some supported and taught others, like Priscilla and Aquilla. Lydia was hospitable and supportive. The woman at the well spread the Good News, and was able to do so despite her low social standing, to the benefit of others in her city. The prophesying daughters of Philip seem to have gone into a ministry of healing, if the ancient sources are accurate. Mary Magdalene, healed of the "seven demons," seems to have been bold and active in her following of Jesus. She had the courage to follow Him to the tomb and be a witness to the Resurrection. Each of these were different, but each was helpful to God's work on earth of reaching out to others with the message of salvation.

In like manner, each of us lives out our calling. As adults, most of us have probably figured out what our lives are about. But, maybe there is some new thing, some seemingly little thing or maybe even a big thing, a new opportunity, into which God extends his call, his invitation, to participate in His great work here on earth. As we prayerfully consider these examples, and the world as we experience it, we can but be alert for such opportunities.

Prayer: God, open our hearts to use our resources hospitably and help us see the people you are calling us to welcome. Amen.

Note: I have drawn on material from the *Interpreter's Bible* and *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* and various online sources. I have not managed to include specific citations. Unlike some other Biblical characters, all we really know about Lydia comes from the *Bible*. She is honored as a saint by the Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal and Lutheran denominations.