

**Ninth Sunday after Pentecost • July 13, 2008**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

Acts 16:11-40

“Portraits of Faith – Lydia: Mission Support”

We don't know all that much about Lydia, the woman that Luke mentions in today's reading from the book of Acts. She came from the city of Thyatira in Asia Minor, what we'd now know as western Turkey, but was now living in the Roman colony city of Philippi. Luke reports that she was a businesswoman who specialized in the import and sale purple fabrics (and clothes, too, most likely). Such items, with their vibrant colorings, would be in high demand, especially since the dyes used to produce them were expensive to produce and hard to obtain in cities like Philippi. She may have been a widower or, perhaps, married to a retired Roman soldier who had been given land in this colony, connecting the goods of her homeland with a market that bought them up. Most Americans would probably call Lydia an “entrepreneur.” What we *do* know about Lydia is that she was a Gentile, but one who had been converted to the Jewish faith: she believed that Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was the one true God. She worshipped Him with the relatively small number of Jewish believers in Philippi. But she didn't yet know of Jesus, the Messiah.

That changed one day. As was their custom, Paul and Luke sought out the Jewish community upon arrival into a new town in order to share the Gospel with them first. They found Lydia and a group of women who had gathered at the riverside outside the city to pray on the Sabbath. As Paul spoke, **the Lord opened Lydia's heart to pay attention** to what was said by Paul. Though we don't know exactly what he said, Paul would have shared the true story of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, Paul would have proclaimed, is God's own Son, the long-promised Messiah for whom they had waited. Christ Jesus came into the world, born of a woman, to share the message of God's forgiving love with a world that needs to be washed clean. Paul may have quoted the Old Testament, which he often did with Jewish audiences because they were familiar with the Scriptures. In the first chapter of Isaiah, for example, God tells us “*though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*” The Holy Spirit may have worked particularly through such language in speaking to Lydia's heart: as a trader in dyed goods, she was probably very familiar with the indelible stain that crimson or scarlet would leave on clean, fresh cloth – even today's OxiClean® could not remove such discoloration. Nothing that man could do would remove the marks of sin; yet God washed them away in the blood of His Son. Unlike the repeated sacrifices that the Jewish people had to offer to make amends for their sin, Jesus became the once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, the fulfillment of the Old Testament's promises, the Messiah. **God worked faith in Lydia's heart and washed her clean in the water of Baptism.** And so great was the power of this good news among the people that Lydia's entire household was baptized, as well!

In response to God's grace to her and her household, Lydia opened her home to those who had brought the Gospel to them: she responded by supporting the mission. Her home became a base of operations for the newly planted church in Philippi, a place from which God's message of forgiveness through Jesus would spread. She provided hospitality and shelter, giving the travelers a place to stay. And following their incarceration in the Philippian prison, Paul and Silas would return to visit Lydia and their other new brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, the church in Philippi became a source of great joy for Paul as it grew, because the Christians there remained faithful to God's Word, becoming more Christ-like through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. Through Lydia, the Holy Spirit gives us both example and encouragement as we gather under Christ's cross, looking to the lives of the saints who have gone before us as *Portraits of Faith*.

Living as God's people in this day and age, we, too, may respond to God's grace by supporting His mission, the mission whose goal is nothing less than the delivery of the forgiveness and

cleansing that Jesus won for us through his life and death, along with the certain hope and assurance of eternal life with God that is proclaimed by Jesus' resurrection. This mission does not take place solely in far-off lands, or even just in church buildings like this one: God's mission is happening in our workplaces and family reunions, in our classrooms and shopping malls, on our soccer fields and at our homes. And regardless of your situation, you may provide "mission support." As a Christian, your work in support of God's mission may be given in a number of ways or offered in many forms, all of which look to use your gifts and passions in the world around you.

Like Lydia, you may respond in mission support by means of your **hospitality**. This could be as simple as opening your home as a place of gathering, where God's love is shared in service and welcome. If you're wondering about ways in which this might take place, you could offer to host a small-group Bible study. You might participate in the Children of Chernobyl program as a number of St. John's families are doing this summer, giving the gift of rest and rejuvenation. You may even volunteer time working in a soup kitchen or as a tutor, not looking for reward or expecting recognition, but living in thanksgiving to God.

You may respond in mission support through **prayer**. Prayer, as we have seen here at St. John's, is indeed a necessary and powerful tool for God's people to use. Pray for your pastors and the lay leaders of the congregation, that they may be faithful servants of Christ. Remember your fellow Christians in prayer, thanking God for their witness. Lift up those concerns and issues that might preoccupy us and distract us from the work that God has called us to do in this world. Pray that the Holy Spirit would put a hunger in the hearts of all those who do not have faith, that they may be fed by God's Word among us and received God's gift for forgiveness and cleansing with us.

You may respond in mission support **financially**, giving back to God a portion of the wealth that He has entrusted to your care. Especially in difficult economic times, you may be tempted to hold back from giving to support God's mission, forgetting that God is ultimately the One who provides for you in all things. You could help sponsor missionaries (at home or abroad), or adopt a student at one of our seminaries as they prepare to enter the service of Christ's church. However, there's a risk that we who are increasingly accustomed to paying for services – everything from lawn care and housekeeping to dog-walking and dry-cleaning – might fall into a "pay somebody else to do it" attitude when it comes to our service in God's kingdom.

Finally, you may respond in mission support through **acts of encouragement**. Affirm the work of those who serve in carrying out God's mission. If you find a sermon to be particularly meaningful, feel free to share that with your pastors – and please tell us why! (I ask follow-up questions, as a number of our members already know!) During hard times, you may share comforting words with your fellow Christians, providing consolation to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your encouragement becomes Christ's, shared with his people through you.

As He did with Lydia, may God open our hearts to pay attention in support of His mission, in the name of Jesus – he who has washed us clean!

Amen.