

Lydia, A Woman Beyond Her Time  
Acts 16:9-15

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

As you know today is Mother's Day. A National Holiday that was first commemorated 99 years ago and has been held on the second Sunday in May ever since. As a pastor, trying to do a worship service on Mother's Day gives us a fine line to walk. In worship we are to praise God and teach his word while at the same time much of society wants to have some type of mention of mothers. So how do we praise God, honor this day of mothers and keep in mind not everyone celebrates with joy this day. To some people this is a wonderful day of thanks and remembrance and to others it is a painful day of sorrow or loss. Whenever we talk about Mother's day, I generally try to impress upon everyone in the worship service to remember the women who raised them and that loved them, because all of us have had those women in our lives. I do this very simply because not all women are mother's. There are a lot of women who cannot have children, did not have children, or have lost infants or children to the sorrows of death. And that's very painful emotionally, especially on this day every year. Mother's day can also remind people of the loss of their own mother, or grandmother and that can be a very painful reminder. Still, others did not have a good relationship with their mothers, they were abused verbally or sexually, they may have been left alone, abandoned or felt to be made worthless and hated. Not all mothers are good mothers, just because they gave birth to you, doesn't mean that they deserve to be honored. Instead we try to remember the motherly women in our lives, be they your mother's, your wives, school teachers, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, or just another relative that care or have cared for us, whoever it was that cared for you – remember them and honor them this day. Each of us I am sure have had women in our lives that have helped make us who we are today, and that is who we should honor and give thanks for this day.

Even in our first reading today we get a woman that deserves respect and honor. And I thought it would be fitting since today is Mother's day to retell the story of Lydia, a woman who doesn't get mentioned a lot in the scriptures, but can teach us a lot. But in the entire three verses she is mentioned, we see a woman most to be admired and appreciated.

Lydia was a successful business woman, actually she was a successful business owner and that was virtually unheard of in the time and society she lived in. Remember this was 2000 years ago in a culture that was slightly male dominated; okay rrrreeaaaallllyyy male dominated. Females weren't exactly property, to be bought and sold, but most were not far

above that. Most marriages were arranged like business deals over money or dowries. Men controlled the woman's rights and decisions. And in that kind of society, here was this one woman, who ran and owned her own business. How do we know this, because unlike many other women mentioned throughout scripture, Lydia is identified not by whose relative she is but instead by her occupation. She wasn't "Sam the weaver's wife, Lydia" - she was "Lydia from Thyatira, a seller of purple goods." Luke the writer of the Acts of the Apostles identifies her as a merchant of expensive goods.

And beyond that – she was a woman "who was a worshiper of God." It was the Sabbath and Lydia had gathered with a group of women to pray at the edge of the river that flowed past the city of Philippi. Philippi was named for the father of Alexander the Great and was located in what we know as Greece, the first actual place that the Gospel was preached in Europe, and it would appear that Lydia was one of the first converts in Europe. We are told that she was from Thyatira, which is across the Aegean Sea in what we now know as Turkey. And we know that she was a specialized merchant, she sold purple cloth, a cloth that was worn by royalty and the wealthy families. The city of Thyatira was famous throughout Asia for the purple dye they produced and Lydia had obviously capitalized on this and was now marketing her fabric in Europe using the city of Philippi as her base.

And it was to the City of Philippi that Paul and his companions had come after leaving Asia Minor. As was their tradition they immediately sought out the closest Jewish community to teach about Jesus. In this case there was no synagogue in town, probably because the Jewish community wasn't large enough, instead the text noted the women gathered alongside the river on the Sabbath to pray and worship together. Again interesting, it doesn't say any men were there, just the women gathered to pray and worship, perhaps it was an early version of the women's group. Whatever brought them there, on that day, that was the day that the Holy Spirit opened Lydia's heart to hearing the Gospel message. On that day, Lydia met Jesus.

So how did this happen? First of all Lydia was in the ***the right place***. I know that we can meet God anywhere. That we can worship God on the golf course or at the hockey rink or fishing on the lake. We can but we don't. If God's name is used on the golf course, it's normally not in positive way, not to say it couldn't be.

There is something to be said about sacred spaces, about church. That's why the Israelites had the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem. God knew the value of there being a spot where you could leave the world outside for a little while and focus on God.

Now I know that Lydia and her companions weren't in a "Church" building, or a "Synagogue" but they were at a spot that they had set aside for prayer and worship, they weren't there fishing, or swimming or boating they had gone to the river to seek God. It must have been an obvious place, because Luke, who is part of Paul's evangelism group, says, "we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place for prayer."

Not only was Lydia **in the right place** but she was there at **the right time** It all came together, we've all been there, perhaps you've been in church a hundred times but then there is that one morning when the Spirit opens you up to something new, that you needed to hear that day. We can read a text over and over and over again, from scripture, but perhaps the tenth, twentieth, or hundredth time the Spirit is there and we see it anew in such a deep moving way, that we never saw before. It happened on that day at that place at that time, for Lydia, and she heard the Gospel and believed. That's amazing really, Lydia from a far off city of Thyatira, just happened to be in the city of Philippi at that right time and place. A week before Paul wasn't there, a week later and he wasn't there but that day he was. If Lydia had decided to sleep in that morning, or go to the flea market, or mow the lawn or spend the day at the beach she would have missed it. But it was the Sabbath and she had gone to meet God and she did.

But it still wasn't enough that Lydia was in **the right place at the right time**, she also had to make **the right decision**. The Bible says that she was a worshipper of God. Biblical scholars tell us that means that she was a gentile woman who knew of God, and worshipped God of Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, even though she was a gentile woman.

But on that day when she heard the words of Paul talking about Jesus and the Good news of his death and resurrection, she was changed. Her heart was opened and she paid attention to what was said. I preach all up here every week, hoping that some of you might be paying attention. But it goes beyond just that. It wasn't just Paul's preaching, it was the Lord that opened her heart and ears to hearing the Word that day. And the greatest thing happened she believed and was baptized. Her and her entire household. We don't know if she was married, widowed, had children, or just servants. We don't know if she was taking care of aging parents in her household or small infants. But we know that she was the head of the household, because in those times what faith the head of the household was so went the rest of the household. She is baptized and believes and so her entire household is baptized and become Christians.

She came to worship, she heard the word, Her heart was opened to it, and she made the decision to believe and accept the grace of Jesus Christ in baptism.

But that's not all. Lydia stands out even more as a wonderful example of faith because she made ***the right response***. In the grace and blessing of God's baptism, she then shows her faith by acting upon it, she invites Paul and Luke and Silas and whoever else was part of that group back to her house to stay. Imagine that risk - You don't know anything about them and you're just inviting them over. Lydia does and with Paul she is in fact taking a big risk, he ends up making enemies in the city, he is beaten, whipped and imprisoned and asked to leave the city, so as to avoid any further disruptions. Once released from prison, Paul again in verse 40 goes to Lydia's house and we are told preaches one final encouraging sermon to the believers who have established a church in her house before he leaves town. Lydia believes, is baptized and houses, feeds this rabble of missionaries that are driven from this town where she is trying to do business and all the while she begins the first house church of the Christian faith in Europe in her own home. My goodness that's some service, that is someone to admire.

It's almost like a loving mother who gives of her self over and over and over again not expecting or demanding anything in return, simply doing it out of love. Lydia is indeed a woman we can admire and give thanks for this day, even as we remember the women in our lives who took us in, cared for us, loved us no matter who we were or what we did. Let us learn from those women and from the example of Lydia, so that we may be in the right spot, at the right time, making the best decision and responding faithfully in all things. Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come.  
AMEN.