

Easter 6C, 2010 (Mother's Day)

Text: Acts 16:9-15

Title: Lydia

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Was Lydia a mother? Well, we don't know for sure. She had a household, so that probably means, yes, she was a mother.

But even if Lydia was never a mother, it's fitting to give thanks for her this day. She's a good example for us, both mothers and non-mothers. In Lydia we see the Lord at work and what He does to change lives.

Now there's not a lot about Lydia in the Bible; she only shows up in a few verses. But we know a few things about her, packed into these few verses.

First, she lives in Philippi. Philippi was an official Roman colony. It was an outpost of Rome here near the edge of the Roman Empire. It was a favorite spot for retired soldiers, and very cosmopolitan. It was a very Roman town, filled with Roman culture and customs.

So it's no surprise that there wasn't a synagogue in Philippi. There was no place for the Jews to worship. The Jews there would have been few and far between, and those who did live in Philippi would not have been the most popular people. The Jews and the Romans didn't always get along. So instead of worshipping at the synagogue, the Jews had a place of prayer outside the city, near a river.

Paul's usual custom, whenever he came into a new town, was to go to the synagogue and meet with the Jews there. But since there was no synagogue in town, he finds the congregation meeting outside the gates by the river. And this is where Paul meets Lydia.

This is where we are introduced to Lydia. Luke tells us three things about Lydia.

First, she's from Thyatira. This was a city in Asia Minor, the place where Paul had just left from. So she was not originally from Philippi.

Second, she sells purple cloth. This is what Thyatira was known for. Previously the only way to make the color purple was by crushing thousands of tiny snails to make the dye. The folks in Thyatira found a local plant that did the job much cheaper and more effectively, and they quickly became known as the place to go for purple.

The trade guilds of Thyatira were very organized, so Lydia was probably the local distributor in Philippi for the cloth dyed in her hometown. So she must have been a savvy businesswoman, and experienced and trustworthy to be running this part of the operation, here in an important Roman colony.

Third, she was a “worshipper of God.” This is a technical term for a Gentile who was interested in the Jewish God. Lydia had not completely converted to Judaism, but she was interested in learning more. She would have observed the Sabbath, and come every week to hear the Torah read, but she had not yet formally joined the congregation.

Lydia was an interesting character. She didn’t fit neatly into any of society’s categories. She was a Gentile who worshipped the Jewish God. She lived in town, but had to leave to go to church. She was born in Asia but lived in Europe. She ran her own business, but she was a woman.

On this mother’s day we like to categorize moms- working moms, stay at home moms, single moms, first-time moms, moms with lots of kids, adoptive mothers, moms with babies, moms with teenagers, moms with adult kids. There lots of different types of moms. But each is unique and special and different. Just like Lydia, each mom is different, and probably doesn’t fit neatly into any category.

What was most special about Lydia was not where she was born, or what she did for a living, or even if she was a mother. What was most special about Lydia was what the Lord did for her.

Lydia was there at the river when Paul came to preach. We don’t know what words he used, we don’t have a copy of his sermon, but he would have talked about Jesus of course.

And notice what happened next- three things.

First, the Lord opened her heart. The Lord opened her heart.

The Lord does all the work. The Lord is the one who made a Christian out of Lydia. It wasn’t her decision, it wasn’t her reasoning it all out and making a logical choice, it wasn’t a spiritual experience that made her a Christian. Lydia was made a Christian when the Lord opened her heart.

That’s how it works with you, too. You are here today because the Lord opened your heart. Apart from Him your heart is hard, closed, shut to hearing the Lord’s word. You are born as an enemy of God and opposed to His will.

But the Lord works through the preaching of His word, and opens your heart to listen to Him and to believe in His word. He does all the work.

Second, she was baptized, along with her entire household. They were by the river, Paul certainly would have mentioned baptism, and so she is baptized.

She has a new identity now. Not just Lydia, the seller of purple from Thyatira, but Lydia, the baptized believer, the one who belongs to Jesus.

And she wants this not just for herself, but for her whole household. Most likely this means her kids and her servants, and anyone else who lived in her house (it would have been a big one).

Finally, Lydia becomes the hostess. She invites Paul and Luke and Silas, and whomever else was traveling with them to stay with her at her house. There were many reasons for this. She probably wanted to hear more from Paul and learn about her new Savior. But she also wanted to show her thanks and gratitude to the Lord for all those whom He had sent to her.

After the Lord makes you His own through His Word and Holy Baptism, you respond in acts of hospitality and generosity. The primary way that you can do this is by supporting the ministers He has sent to preach, by giving generously to your church so that your pastor is well cared for.

When Jesus sent out His disciples, He told them to stay with those who opened their homes, and to depend on their support.

What a joy it is that the Lord allows you to play a part in spreading the word. You might be shy and nervous about talking about Jesus, especially to a group of strangers. That's okay. The Lord doesn't call everyone to be a pastor or a missionary. What you can do to make sure that His word is preached and that people are being baptized, is to support your pastor, just like Lydia did.

The most important thing about Lydia was not where she was from or what she did for a living, or even if she was a mother. The most important thing about Lydia was what the Lord did in and through her.

The Lord opened her heart and brought her to faith. The Lord made her His own in Holy Baptism.

Lydia responded by bringing the rest of her household to be baptized, and by giving generously to support the work of the church.

That is what happens with you, too. The Lord opens your heart through the preached word, brings you to be baptized, and then uses you as part of His church. The Lord does this for you, too, mothers and non-mothers, men and women, children and adults.

We only hear of Lydia once more in the Bible. After meeting with Lydia, Paul and Silas get into some legal trouble. They are thrown in jail, but the Lord sets them free. Before they leave town, they stop by at Lydia's house. There they meet with the Christians one last time before heading on to the next town.

The picture we have of Lydia is one whose heart is opened, and who opens her home.

For all of you moms out there, your focus should not be on yourself- whether you've been a good mom or a bad mom, whether you've made all the right decisions for your kids along the way, whether you've been a success or a failure, whether your kids have turned out right or not.

Don't focus on yourself, because you will most likely get depressed for not living up to being the perfect mom. You'll get caught up in thinking about what else you could have done for your kids.

Instead of focusing on yourself and what kind of mother you've been, focus on what the Lord has done for you.

The Lord has blessed you and entrusted you with children. More importantly, He has loved you and redeemed you. He has forgiven all the mistakes that you've made along the way.

Just like Lydia, the Lord has opened your heart and made you His own in Holy Baptism.

Through Him you have brought your kids to be baptized and given generously in response to His love.

Being a mother, being a Christian, doesn't mean being perfect, it means being one like Lydia who received the Lord's gift and responded in love.