
Lydia, and the Way of Jesus

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The Sixth Sunday of Easter - Year C
Acts 16:9-15
John 14:23-29

"A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening ..." -Acts 16:14

A quick history review: in the first century, A.D., most religious Jews lived in and around Jerusalem. That is natural enough. But there were also Jewish populations in many of the major cities of what is now Asia, and Africa, and Europe. Exile and dispersion had separated the Jewish people. Then, trade plus the freedom of ex-slaves had developed Jewish colonies in places like Alexandria, and even Rome.

But there may not have been large Jewish colonies in the smaller towns, maybe towns like Philippi, just to the north of the Aegean Sea, in what is now Europe. According to ancient Jewish tradition, it took ten Jewish men, together in prayer, to start a synagogue. That was called a minyan: the minimum of ten men, praying together, that could be a synagogue.

Note the word "men." They had to be men. Many scholars believe that Philippi, a Roman colony, on the trade route from Asia to Rome, did not have enough Jewish men in it to start a synagogue. That would explain why, on a Sabbath morning one day in the first century, a woman named Lydia had gone down to the river to pray.

Lydia, says Acts 16, was a worshiper of the one true God. This might have meant she was a Gentile who yet worshipped the Jewish God; but it might have meant she was a Jew herself, just not a male Jew. She was not at a synagogue, most probably because one did not exist. And it may be that one did not exist because not enough Jewish men had come together to form one.

It was down by the river that Paul found the woman Lydia in prayer. This town was the first major place Paul would visit on the continent of Europe. Paul, the Apostle, had heard a voice in a vision, a voice saying, "Come over here, across the water. Come to Macedonia." Paul was taking the gospel of Jesus Christ to an entirely new region, in fact, a new continent.

Paul did not immediately find any receptive hearts among the Jewish men. But he found Lydia. The Book of Acts says that "the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Then, she and her whole household were baptized, and she invited Paul to her house.

Let us pause, however, to consider this unusual event! A woman, Lydia, is inviting this foreign man and his company, to visit her house. This woman, Lydia, was strong, strong enough to prevail over certain social customs, including whether it was proper even to speak to men down by the river. Women did not always speak to men, and would certainly never invite them to their homes!

But it may be that this woman, Lydia, had already proven herself stronger than the social norm. She was a successful woman of trade, a "dealer in purple," the scriptures say. Purple cloth was noble cloth, royal cloth, the best cloth there was. Lydia, apparently, was among the leaders in an elite local trade.

After Lydia is baptized, along with her entire household, and after Paul accepts her invitation to her house, it is there "in Lydia's house" that the first Christian church is begun in Europe: the Philippian Church. According to local custom, Lydia could not be among those who started a synagogue, but she could start a Christian Church; and she did. That is the church, the Philippian Church, to which Paul would later write one of his most glorious letters, the Epistle to the Philippians. That letter would not have been written were it not for Lydia.

This small story is an indication of how the Christian gospel distinguishes itself, when it comes up against the world "in any century! When he was trying to start a Christian community in Philippi, who did Paul go to? It was not the normal sort of religious host and leader; it was Lydia. Culturally, this was an anomaly; this was a woman.

But this is not an anomaly when it comes to Christianity. Every century teaches us anew that in Jesus, God works in a different way from the way the world works. God's way will almost always be different from the way of the world. That is our lesson for today.

In today's gospel account from John, Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (John 14: 27). It is the second part of that verse that bears repetition: "I do not give to you as the world gives." The way of Jesus will be different from the way of the world.

Oh, there may be some happy overlapping. It is wonderful when a faithful Christian is also seen as successful and popular in the world. But the two identities do not always go together: Christian success is not always the same as worldly success. Today, for instance, there are millions of faithful Christians, successful Christians, who live unnoticed from the glare of the world's television cameras and twitter accounts.

You do not have to be acknowledged by the world, in order to be a successful Christian. Success means knowing and living the gospel of Christ, no matter how the world reacts.

For instance, surely all of us, whether Christian or not, want peace. Many people in this world would enjoy this line of Jesus, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." But then Jesus adds another wary line: "I do not give to you as the world gives." Be careful if you really want the peace that Jesus gives; it may not be the peace that the world generally expects.

William Alexander Percy, the great writer, lawyer, and Roman Catholic, in Mississippi, knew this. He was also a poet, and one of his poems is now a fine hymn in the Episcopal Church, hymn number 661. It starts with the lovely image of happy fishermen in Galilee; their lives were going along just fine.

*They cast their nets in Galilee, just off the hills of brown;
Such happy, simple fisherfolk, before the Lord came down.*

But listen to how Percy describes the so-called peace that they found in Jesus Christ.

*Contented, peaceful fishermen, before they ever knew
The peace of God that filled their hearts brimful, and broke them too.*

*Young John who trimmed the flapping sail, homeless in Patmos died.
Peter, who hauled the teeming net, head-down was crucified.*

*The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.
Yet let us pray for but one thing "the marvelous peace of God."¹*

William Alexander Percy actually allowed his poem to be altered a bit in order to be this hymn, but he refused to allow a change in that next to last line: "The peace of God, it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod."

The peace of God is not just an absence of violence. It is not just an antiseptic, uncontaminated, unfeeling, disconnected state of oblivion from the world. The real peace of God comes from struggle and work. It can be quite dirty. It takes effort. It can be "strife closed in the sod," said Percy.

We might say the same thing for other virtues that the world appreciates: justice, for instance. God's justice is not the same as the world's justice. In Christianity, justice is not merely retribution, or a legal concept. In God's world, justice is about living in healthy relationship, no matter what the law is. Justice is right relationship.

Or take love. The love of God is simply not the same as the love of this world. The love of God is not selfish or possessive. It is self-giving and enormous, generous until death. The love of God is not something that just falls into our laps as some sort of entitlement; love, self-giving love, is a matter of will and effort.

The great apostle, Paul, is the first great missionary. Paul is rightly credited with taking the way of Jesus into the world, a world that desperately needs the way of Jesus, but which often has no understanding of what this way is.

For Paul in Philippi, the way of Jesus meant going against the cultural norms of conversing with a woman at the river. The way of Jesus meant finding a woman who would start the first Christian Church in Europe, not a man at all.

For William Alexander Percy, the way of Jesus meant knowing that peace is not just the easy life. Peace involves strife, strife closed in the sod.

For us, the way of Jesus is something different from the way of the world, whether we are talking about love, or justice, or peace itself. Yes, we want peace. But not peace as the world gives. There is only one peace that deeply satisfies, and that is the peace of Christ. Let us pray, for that one thing: the marvelous peace of God.

AMEN.

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¹Hymn 661 in *The Hymnal 1982*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, New York: 1985. Words by William Alexander Percy, altered. Words copyright by Edward B. Marks Music Corporation.