

ACTS 16: 11-15

LYDIA
WHAT'S YOUR PURPLE?
MAY 5, 2013

I may have mentioned this once or twice before, but I LOVE Scripture! This is wonderful material – I love the book of Acts and the way the lectionary takes us through it after Easter.

What it does, among other things, is to keep showing us what kind of people we're called to be, and what kind of community the Risen Christ has called into being.

It's so exciting to watch the infant church get their feet under them – turning from a band of frightened – terrified people who had responded to the crucifixion of their friend by taking off and abandoning him....

from that, into a force that turned the world upside down.

Just to review now: who wrote the book?

The early church is functioning on the fly – they have no rule book, no scriptures other than the Hebrew scriptures....they are making it up as they go along. Facing questions as they arise, responding to the leading of the Spirit

and the Spirit kept calling them to more and more radically inclusive community. Jesus had said to love EVERYONE – God loves everyone he said. What did that mean?

And as you read this book it's like watching wall after wall after wall fall down.

The delicious reading from Revelation about the walls of the city studded with jewels....

the walls fade into the background as the perpetually open gates take the spotlight.

12 gates. Open always by day and there IS no night there.

Isn't this good?

The kept learning more and more about the specifics of what it means to say the gates are open; that God's love is unconditional and for everyone.

I could go on and on about that, but for today I want to focus on Lydia and her part in the early church. She has been called Paul's Cornelius.

More about that in a minute.

Let's read that story again.

11-16, 40

This story is interesting for a few reasons.

1 – She's a woman. This is first century Palestine. Men, speaking to women in public, is just not done. Jesus had done it, yes, and paid dearly for it. Here, his followers clearly are willing to follow him in that way.

Compared to the society around them, the church must have seemed very radical. Not only did men and women speak together in public, but there were women leaders and prophets. Now, as the church grew and changed – we know that... maybe it was already beginning to change by the time Luke was writing this, and he wants to write about Lydia to remind them, and make the point that the leadership of women was rooted in the apostles and in Paul....

so: the very fact that Lydia is a woman makes this interesting.

2 – She's a rich woman. Luke, all through his gospel, has said how difficult it is for the rich to understand and accept the truth. Too much to lose. But here, he shows again the inclusive nature of the gospel. He doesn't sink to the level of "rich bashing" - he's willing to allow that the rich have their place as well in this new community.

AND, in those days, as shocking as it would be for men and women to be sharing leadership and speaking to one another in public, equally shocking would be the mixing of classes. Lydia is rich. (she's a seller of purple, which is a rare, expensive dye. It's like she is the owner of a Porsche dealership.)

For her to invite the Christians to her home would be unthinkable to many. They're pretty scruffy, uneducated, poor fishers. Under normal circumstances they would never be having dinner together – yet in the name of this Jesus person they get rid of those barriers and just do it. That must have been a powerful witness.

Finally – she's a gentile. We've been through this a lot lately. Her food, her dishes, her customs would be considered unclean by many of them, just as Cornelius did for Peter in chapter 10 last week, Lydia calls Paul to her home and provides him with an opportunity to put his money where his mouth is when it comes to equality in Christ.

All of that is fabulous

but for the time that's left I want to take this in a different direction.

It's about spiritual gifts, and what God requires.

I spent some time in China at one point, visiting a friend who was teaching there. I had a conversation with a woman who had recently become a Christian. She's an academic, raised as an atheist, and after 5 years of study and prayer, finally was baptized. It had been a really hard decision for her.

Not because she had trouble believing in God (although she had trouble with some of the church's teachings, and so she should. Being part of a church doesn't mean – ever- that you have to swallow everything)

so it wasn't that

it was a fear that she wasn't good enough, and that she'd be expected to be someone she was not. To give something she couldn't give. She was afraid she didn't have what it takes.

Her name is Hannah.

And I said to Hannah what I'd say to Lydia and to you too.

You are good enough

you have everything it takes.

You will never be asked to be someone you are not or give something you cannot

YOU are enough.

What God requires from us is that we are truly authentically joyfully who we are.

And each of us has gifts

and it's those gifts we're asked to share.

Do you know what I mean?

Lydia was rich. She could share her money

she had a home and obviously the gift of hospitality

She could do that

and she did.

She also had power and position and I don't know this to be true but I hope that she used them to speak to power in the name of justice in a way that the others could not, as she grew in her faith.

Of all the places I could have taken this sermon I chose this one because right after church we're having a job fair, where each of the committees of our church is there to explain the work they do and invite you to consider taking part.

First, though, I want to double check something with you: I had a conversation this week with someone who wanted to ask me about my sermon last week. She understood me to say that it wasn't good enough to work at the church but that the real work is in the world.

And in a way I did say that butwhat I meant to say is that even though we do need people to work here, committees and all the things that keep a church going, I was saying that sometimes churches have a bad habit of making you feel guilty, until you sign up for a committee and do something you don't really feel called or equipped to do, sometimes churches can suck up all your time until you don't have time for other things, the things in the world that are life-giving and healthy and the ministry that waits us out there. Does that make sense? Don't let us take up all your time. We should be doing what we can here to equip you to work and live in the world with joy and excellence.

I can see why she was confused. I seem to be talking out of both sides of my mouth....we need people for our work here at the church. We do.

But we do not want to exhaust you or sap you or burn you out.

Please pray and discover what gives you joy, what you do well, what gifts you have – what is your purple? Lydia had her gifts because she worked in purple. What is your purple? What is your passion, your strength? What can you offer with energy and joy? That's what we want. That's what God wants from you.

This seems so simple, but we keep forgetting it, thinking it's all complicated.

But God wants us to be us.

Discover and use the gifts we've already been given.

What are yours?

Seriously?

What are the things you can offer, things you do easily and well?

And how can you use these things to be a blessing to others?

One more story about someone I know: His name is Doug and he was in one of the churches I served. He was on one of the committees because he thought he should help out, but he didn't really enjoy the work, didn't feel he was contributing....

he came to me and said “you said last week that a clue to my spiritual gifts is thinking about what gives me joy. What gives ME joy is playing golf. What do you make of that? How can I use THAT to serve the church?”

So we talked and out of that came something pretty awesome. He gathered a few friends who also like playing golf. They worked through the Christian development committee, but they didn't go to meetings. They started golfing and having breakfast once a month, they invited some teenaged boys from the youth group to join them, a kind of male mentoring thing, and the last I heard they organize a tournament each summer for M&S. All because he liked to golf.

What I'm saying is

you're a gifted person, and like Lydia, you're called to use your gifts creatively, for the good of the

community. God doesn't ask you to be someone you're not. Be you. Offer what you can. YOU are exactly the right person. You are enough.
And I'm absolutely convinced that every church has all the gifts it needs in order to thrive and grow.
When each person does what Lydia did
offer what they can
from a good place, an honest place
God can take our gifts and work with us
to turn the world upside down.