

CHARACTERS WITH CHARACTER: LYDIA

Acts 16:11-15

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 11, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us.

I.

When I graduated from seminary and began my ministry in 1980, I served a church in West Texas as an Associate Pastor for Youth and Young Adults. A few years earlier, the church had been bequeathed a large, Art Deco home, on ten acres of land, in a nearby residential. One of my responsibilities was to work with a committee to renovate the home for youth and family ministries and to develop programs to serve the community.

The committee decided that we would start something new in those days: an After-School program, where children from low-income households could come for enrichment and support until their parents picked them up for the evening. We wanted to renovate a garage in the home as one room for this program, and a member of the committee, a woman then in her sixties, told me that she could help with the funding for that. I got a bid from a carpenter in the church, went and met with her, and she wrote a check for the entire amount. It was \$12,000. That was more than half my annual salary, and I couldn't believe she paid for the whole project.

A couple of decades later, I learned she and her husband had become supporters of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary. More than forty years after her original gift to renovate the garage of the home for an after-school program, and long after their deaths, I verified this week that she and her husband have given more than \$5 million over the years to the seminary.

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She was the first of several women in churches I have served whose large financial gifts have made a difference in the level of ministry each church is able to have.

In Iowa I did the funeral of a man who had passed away during a time in which he and his wife were without a church home. Together they had started a company years before that manufactured product I believe he had patented: the small brackets on conveyer belts that allow an item to be carried up an incline to the next level in the factory.

Leaving church a Sunday or so later, his widow noticed that we were exploring how to make the entrance to the church from the parking lot more efficient and accessible. She said: “I wouldn’t mind helping with that project.” I went to see her and her initial gift of \$30,000 for an architectural led to her funding about a \$300,000 lobby/entrance to the church. When that was completed she began supporting the church with a \$75,000 annual pledge, which represented more than 10% of the church’s budget. When she passed away seven or eight years later, she had been able to endow about half her pledge. As she was nearing the end of her life, she gave us permission to share her name and the amount of her pledge with the congregation, which led them to make up nearly all of her pledge in one annual campaign.

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At Westminster, there have been several instances like these.

Many of you know the impact of the bequest that Gloria Horning left our congregation. Gloria was a native of Mobile, Alabama, who loved music and sang professionally in New York for a few years, but then came to Washington to serve as stenographer for President Johnson, followed by a long career in the DC courts, and finally, serving as assistant to journalist Bill Moyers. She never married, had no children, and lived in a small house on Valley Drive with her beloved dog. She sang in our choir. She took the Bible course the year we were at Agudas Achim, always arriving early in her walker. When she was unable to attend worship, she called our office nearly every morning where Tara and Jessica and others who worked there chatted with her for a few minutes.

Once when I visited her, always holding her dog on my lap, she talked about eventually having to leave her house, and said, “Well, it will be okay; you (meaning the church) are going to get it.” Sure enough, when she passed away in her nineties, she left half her estate (including her home) to Westminster (over a million dollars) and the other half to a national Christian organization whose mission is direct relief of people in need of food, clothing, shelter. Our Foundation and Session endowed her bequest, as we essentially do all undesignated bequests, and for the last several years, her bequest produces \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year to support our ministries.¹

II.

You may have thought you were coming for the third in a series of eight sermons on “characters in the Bible with character,” and indeed you are.

Each of the women I have described – with their differences in geographic background, political outlook, family make up, and professional experience – used in abundance the financial resources they had to support the church in which they worshipped, studied, experienced fellowship, and served others in ways that made a difference in their lifetimes and extended beyond their own deaths. They did so without neglecting their families, their responsibilities to their community, their responsibilities to their own health and safety. They were not limited by the Biblical standard of tithing 10% of their income. Neither did they sell all and to follow Christ. Rather, they gave thoughtfully, with intentionality and planning, to the of Gospel of Jesus Christ, including care for the least, the last, and the lost. The character trait they had was using their material and financial resources – in abundance – to support the work of the church.

This generosity is what they had in common – and perhaps drew their inspiration from – with the character who is before us today.

¹ See her story at <https://wpc-alex.org/remembering-gloria-horning/>.

A few years after the death and resurrection of Christ, the church decides – through the Jerusalem Council – that the Gospel of Christ is not intended to be limited to people who from within Judaism accept Jesus as the Messiah and embrace him as such, but rather his gospel and messiahship are for people of all nations and religious backgrounds. Thereafter, the Apostle Paul, who is himself Jewish,² takes the Gospel into the non-Jewish, Greco-Roman world and shares it with Gentiles, the name given to those who are not Jewish.³

When Paul comes to Philippi, a city located in the mountainous region of Macedonia, in northern Greece, among several women he meets there is one named Lydia, who is not from Philippi, but from a city called Thyatira. She is immediately identified in the text as a “dealer in purple.” Purple cloth was the finest and most expensive material in that region at that time. The only people who could afford or wear purple were the wealthy and members of the royal families.⁴ As a dealer in purple, Lydia is herself the owner of a business, a prominent citizen, likely wealthy. There is no mention of a husband specifically, but she is the head of a household. She owns a home: unusual for a woman in her day and time, but not commented upon by Luke as he tells her story.

Fresh from the Jerusalem Council, the Apostle Paul, Silas, and Timothy⁵ travel to Philippi. On the sabbath day, in order to figure out who might be interested in hearing about the Gospel they have brought, they have to go outside the city gate, near the river, where a small group of people, perhaps Jewish, perhaps Gentile, perhaps both, gather near what seems to be a place of prayer. A good number of the small group are women, among them Lydia, who is described as “a worshipper of God,” which means that she worships the God of Israel while not being Jewish.⁶ So she is a Gentile.

Luke then tells us:

- The Lord *opens* her heart
- She *listens eagerly* to what Paul is saying
- She and her household are then *baptized*, presumably in the adjacent river
- She then says to Paul and his colleagues: “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, *come* and *stay* at my home”
- She *prevails upon them* to accept their offer
- They *move* into her home and make it their *base of operation*
- Later, when they are arrested, imprisoned, beaten and then released,⁷ it is Lydia who is there to *receive* them and *bring them back* into her home,⁸ where like the Innkeeper in the Parable of the Good Samaritan,⁹ she helps *nurse them to health*
- Thus, this dealer of purple takes into her home the *injured, rejected, socially and religiously outcast leaders* of the new movement soon to be called Christianity
- From later comments by Paul when he writes the Philippians thanking them for their terrific financial support,¹⁰ it is likely that Lydia was a driving force behind such support.

² See Acts 9.

³ See Acts 15.

⁴ See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 292-293.

⁵ See Acts 15:40 and 16:3. This constitutes the “we” of the text before us.

⁶ Johnson points out that Luke’s language is flexible enough to include the possibility that she was a Gentile attracted to the synagogues’ teaching or a pious Jewish convert, though in any event, she is likely a Gentile.

⁷ Acts 16:16-40.

⁸ Acts 16:40.

⁹ Luke 10:25-37, especially vs. 35.

¹⁰ See Philippians 1:5, 4:15-18, and II Corinthians 11:9.

- Lydia goes down in Christian history as the first convert to Christianity on European soil.¹¹

III.

As we ask of all eight characters with whom we are spending time this summer, what is the *source* of her character?

Luke, who tells her story, attributes it to two things closely tied together.

- First, Luke says, “*the Lord opened her heart.*”¹²

Luke is emphasizing something we often forget: the openness we have to faith, belief, religious experience, religious commitment – is something that *ultimately comes from God*. Whatever openness you or I have to God is an openness that God’s gives us. Whatever instinct we have to search, to question, even to explore our doubt or skepticism, is something God give us that our searching might lead to our finding, our rather, to our being found.

The preacher doesn’t create our searching. The choir doesn’t create it. The church doesn’t create it. Our spouse or friend or lover or family member or soul mate or conversation partner or email correspondent don’t create it. Whatever curiosity we have, whatever attraction we have, whatever interest we have in matters ultimate and religious, come from beyond ourselves. It comes from God. It comes from God. It is therefore worth paying attention to.

- Second, Luke says next, “*to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.*” The full statement reads: “The Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to listen eagerly.”

“*Eagerly*” means that Lydia brought something to the activity of listening. She was a participant in her own listening. She expected something to happen. She expected to learn something. She expected to be moved. She expected to be challenged. She expected to be illuminated.¹³ She may have even expected to be made a bit uncomfortable, a bit “convicted.” Lydia didn’t just open her patio chair, nest herself within it, set her drink on the cute little table she just bought online and had delivered by Amazon, take out her laptop and say: “*Entertain me, Paul*”; “*Make me feel good, Paul*”; “*Tell me what I’m supposed to do, Paul.*” She listened not passively but actively, expectantly, eagerly. “God *opened* her heart” and she “allowed her heart to *listen eagerly.*”

I have been preaching a long time. And I cannot tell you how moving, almost reverent it is, to look out and see that somebody is glued to what is coming out of my mouth, that somebody is rivetted to it, that somebody is listening with their whole mind and body and soul. I can still the face of a Lebanese economist with wire rim glasses and wavy, salt and pepper hair who was sitting near the back of a large, beautiful Gothic but un air-conditioned sanctuary I preached in in Brooklyn, in 1977 and 1978. I was telling the story of Ezekiel’s dry bones and he was utterly rivetted on it. It was reverently eerie for me to realize how intently and eagerly he was listening. I don’t create that. “The Lord opened Lydia’s

¹¹ John Cumming, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 25. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lydia_of_Thyatira, accessed 7/10/21,

¹² This is the same word *dianoigo* Luke uses in the Road to Emmaus story to describe the risen Christ “opening” the disciples’ eyes (Luke 24:33), the scriptures (24:32), and the disciples’ minds (24:45). (Johnson 293).

¹³ According to Johnson, the verb here *prosecho* means “being attracted/devoted/committed.” (293). See Acts 8:6, 10, 11, as well as I Timothy 4:13, Hebrews 2:1, II Peter 1:19.

heart...” but I get to see – every once in a while – “the eager, expectant, rivetted listening” that follows.

Lydia’s generosity grows out of her character, and her character develops because the because the Lord opens her heart and she listens eagerly. Luther once wrote: "There are *three* conversions necessary: the conversion of the *heart*, the conversion of the *mind*, and the conversion of the *purse*."¹⁴

Lydia realizes so much of what she has is more beneficial to the growing movement of the church than to what she had thought were needs of her own.¹⁵ She experiences “conversion of the purse.”

All of it is part of her character to which “eager listening creates.”

IV.

Several of you have commented that the characters we have seen so far in this series have all been women. This is true. We have five more to go, and we’ll encounter two men, but three more will be women.

I know I started today’s sermon with stories of three women who were tremendous in their financial support of the work of the church; and obviously, their model, Lydia, was also a woman.

That is all well and good. But I didn’t mean to leave a false impression:

Men: the conversion of the purse is open to you as well.

Amen.

¹⁴ Available at <http://liberlocorumcommunium.blogspot.com/2015/07/pseudo-luther-on-conversion-of-purse.html>.

¹⁵ In the letters to seven churches in Chapters 2-3 in Revelation, the church at Thyatira comes in for among the harshest of indictments by the seer John, though this is for religious violations rather than apparent economic ones. Revelation 2:18-29.