

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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The Color Purple

Proverbs 31.10-25 and Acts 16.11-15

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Before reading Old Testament

Last summer we enjoyed retelling some of the most well known stories from our sacred text. We started with creation and covered Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Esau and the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. It was good to go back to stories that many thought they knew and try to hear them as if for the first time. This summer we thought we would dig a little deeper and pull from some of the lesser known stories of the Bible to see what we can glean. Just to give you a sneak preview of coming attractions, Russ has been doing a lot of reading on Balaam's talking donkey. Now that's one you'd think we'd know at least as well as Jonah and the fish! (It never says "whale.") Today's story is Lydia. The Old Testament text that I have chosen to go with our Lydia story from the Acts of the Apostles gives us a glimpse into the industrious, hard-working life of a woman who is caring for her family. This woman from Proverbs 31 stands for all women who manage households and/or hold down jobs. But since it is Father's Day, let us not focus on women only, but let us use these two texts about women who deal in purple cloth to symbolize all folks who are hard working and committed to taking care of their families and providing the best for their loved ones. (Read Proverbs 31.10-25)

Before reading New Testament

To fill you in a little more on Lydia: "Lydia was a seller of purple cloth who was converted by Paul in Philippi and played a key role in the foundation of the church there . . . Lydia was from the city of Thyatira, which was located in a western region of Asia Minor called Lydia.

Information about Thyatira helps one understand her occupation and religious inclinations. The city was famous for its dyeing, and inscriptions have been discovered honoring the guild of dyers in Thyatira. They were especially famed for the manufacture of a luxurious purple dye. This dye was probably extracted from Mediterranean mollusks. Eight thousand of these mollusks were required to produce just one gram of dye so the dye was very expensive and used to color woven materials and cloths . . . Lydia imported the dyed purple fabrics from her hometown of Thyatira and sold them in Philippi for a profit. Her business probably made her wealthy. [In Acts 16 we learn] that she owned her own home and it was large enough to accommodate other family members and several guests as well. The absence of any reference to a husband indicates that Lydia was single – widowed, divorced, or never married . . . Apparently there was no synagogue in Philippi, but Lydia and several other women met by the Gangites River outside the city to worship. Paul and his companions met them there during Paul’s second missionary journey. After he explained the good news of Jesus Christ to them, Lydia accepted Paul’s message and was baptized with her household (including relatives, children, and/or slaves). One result of her conversion was that she immediately opened her home to the missionaries . . . She is an excellent example of one early Christian who was not poor, but rather who used her wealth to help spread the gospel.” (Mercer Dictionary of the Bible, Mark J. Olson, pages 531-532) (Read Acts 16.11-15)

READ TEXT

Having spent 5 weeks in India about 15 years ago and seeing the traditional sites of Buddha’s first sermon and the place where Buddha is buried and taking my shoes off in many more temples that I care to recount, I have had the desire to travel to the land that holds holy value for me. In preparing for my 2 weeks in the Holy Land this summer, I’ve tried to imagine

walking on some of the same ground on which Jesus walked. But I think I may be more interested in walking along the same paths where some of the first Followers of the Way travelled. I still remember hearing a friend of mine who in her early sixties travelled to the Holy Land and sat by the supposed river where Lydia had gathered with other women to pray. That little gathering was the start of the church in Philippi. This sixty plus year old woman, who had been denied entry into the ministry because of her gender and chose the path of teaching instead, felt God on that river bank in a way that soothed her longing and aching soul. Simply being in that place gave my friend hope and validated her as a person and a beloved child of God – called to ministry – yet never getting to fully live out her calling. I don't know that we'll get anywhere close to that river bank, but anytime I hear the name Lydia, I am transported in my own mind's eye to a grassy spot by a babbling brook where my story really starts. Because of Lydia's story, I am able to live out my calling.

But the more I thought about the story of Lydia, I couldn't get the story of the rich young ruler out of my mind. *Sell all you have and give it to the poor . . .* And I thought about all the admonitions from the Bible concerning money – the love of money is the root of all evil, easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom, Jesus turning over the money-changers table in the Temple. Jesus talked a whole lot about money and rarely did he have a positive word concerning it. As we who live in an affluent part of south Charlotte sit in this beautiful sanctuary and, for the most part, living lives a comfort, what does the gospel story have to say to us? Sell everything and give it to the poor? That is the calling for some I do believe. But where does that leave the rest of us who either haven't heard that call or have chosen not to go there? What is the gospel word for an affluent people?

We don't hear Paul reprimanding Lydia for her profiteering. She is not chastised for having a nice house. She is not guilted into selling everything and giving it all away. She seems to me to be an early capitalist. As the Oxford American Dictionary defines it, capitalism is "an economic system in which trade and industry are controlled by private owners." As Americans, we cling to this system as a tried and true method of societal success. It is a system that honors hard work with an incentives approach to success. And it works. Capitalism is our pride and joy as Americans, and it is what we want for all people. Freedom. Work. Success.

And so I ask – not what have we been freed from, but what have we been freed for? Is work just something that you do or is there meaning and fulfillment in your life's work – and I'm not just talking about what you get paid to do. For many, what they get paid to do is not their life's work. And what would success look like if we finally achieved it? Frederick Buechner, author and minister, may be most well-known for one powerful sentence. The first time that I remember reading it it was printed as the written meditation at the beginning of our service of ordination. "Vocation is the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." (Wishful Thinking) "The impression is given that [Lydia] is self-sufficient, a successful business woman with a decent income whose hospitality demonstrates her fine character . . . Indeed, it is her home that becomes the spiritual center for the entire city, and the story's presumption is that she becomes its spiritual leader." (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X, Robert W. Wall, page 235)

What are we doing with our affluence? If Lydia had sold her home and given it to the poor, the church nearest and dearest to Paul's heart would have had no place to meet. Instead of spending our days feeling guilty for what we have or defensive for having a good life, let us ask ourselves – what are we doing with our affluence? Hoarding it or reinvesting it? Keeping it or

sharing it? “[Lydia’s] attention to Paul’s message because ‘the Lord opened her heart’ may well be the result of her good character, reflected in her hospitable reception of Paul. The connection between hospitality – sharing goods with others – and responsiveness to the word of God is an important literary device in both Luke and Acts . . . Several details of Lydia’s professional resume indicate her success: She owns her own business and her own home. She is a ‘dealer in purple cloth’ from Thyatira, a city well known for its textile industry. Purple clothing was destined for the rich and royal in the Roman world, where it symbolized power and influence. A merchant in purple cloth, then, is someone who rubbed shoulders daily with society’s rich and famous. Luke’s use of Lydia’s personal name in his story may well indicate her social prominence.” (New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume X, Robert W. Wall, pages 231-232) Perhaps Lydia was the first capitalist!

And this is not just about our financial affluence. It is about our power – our voice. Are we using our power to be an advocate for those who have no voice? Are we speaking for those who have been silenced? Are we using our creative genius to pour back into our society ideas and solutions, or do we too quickly throw up our hands because the problems seem too large and we seem too small? What happens to our entrepreneurial, capitalist spirit sometimes? I think we let despair creep into our freedom loving, hard-working, success driven psyches and as someone has noted – it is sin to despair! (Charlie Milford)

I think of Millard Fuller - founder of Habitat for Humanity - who was a self-made millionaire and gave it all to affordable housing. I had the privilege one day of having lunch with him with about 10 other people. We heard his story not from a lectern and microphone, but in an intimate setting of breaking bread together. And at that lunch hour I had the realization that Millard Fuller was always going to be a millionaire. He is one of those people that is wired for

making money. It's what he did with his wealth that really mattered. And then there is Bill Gates - arguably one of the most successful men of all time - who has made a lot and given a lot away. And in our own midst I know of 3 men who are using their power and their wealth and their influence: one is working to get jobs for those recently freed from incarceration; another is offering opportunities for small loans to small businesses who would never qualify for a traditional loan; and another is petitioning our local leaders to spend tax money wisely by challenging proposals that imply that the answers to our crime rate lie in building more jails. These three men remind me of Lydia - they are using what they have in wealth and influence and putting it back into the system to create a better way.

For Lydia, it was the color purple that drove her to use her power and her wealth and her influence to show hospitality to a small band of believers. And a church was started. May it be so for us as well.