

McCabe United Methodist Church

The Idols We Love: A Holy Tug-of-War

Lent 2017, Sermon and Worship Series

“Lydia of Thyatira”

Sermon on Joshua 24:14-15 & Acts 16:11-15, NRSV (03-08-17)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

“It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.”¹

Isn't that beautiful? Paul of Tarsus wrote those words at the beginning of a letter he wrote to me and my fellow believers – those of us who are part of the church he planted in our city... the city of Philippi. Paul was in prison when he wrote to us and it meant so much to hear from him. We prayed for him – fervently – every day.

Excuse me – I've gotten ahead of myself. My name is Lydia. Many people know me as “Lydia of Thyatira.” I'm from the city of Thyatira... but I haven't lived there in many years. I live in the Macedonian city of Philippi.

¹ Philippians 1:1-11

And, as I said, I have the great honor and privilege of being part of the church there – the church started by Paul of Tarsus.

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Paul was so thankful for those of us in the Philippian church... but *we* were so thankful for *him* because it was *he* who introduced us to Jesus!

If it had not been for Paul, my household and I would never have come to know the abundant mercy of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If it had not been for Paul, we would never have been baptized.

But, again, I am a bit ahead of myself.

Thyatira – the city of my childhood – was known throughout the world for its exceptional indigo dyes. That meant our city was frequented by the emissaries of lords, chieftains, and kings. Every royal family had need of our luxurious purple cloth... and I was the oldest daughter in a family with generations of experience in the elite indigo dye business.

I was schooled in the trade by my mother. While my brothers learned the craft of creating and *using* the precious indigo dyes, my sisters and I learned the art of *selling* our goods – whether to brokers or, sometimes, directly to the wealthy and powerful. “Sellers of purple” is what we were often called.

As most girls did, I married young and began having children. My husband was also a businessman in the dye industry. While many wives and mothers maintained their households and rarely went anywhere apart from their husbands, I continued to sell our beautiful, purple cloth – traveling frequently.

² Philippians 1:3-5

Even when our children were young, I worked hard to help my husband be competitive in our line of work. It wasn't easy. We moved to Philippi in order to carve out our own niche in the industry.

Seven days a week, all year... we worked *hard*. And we were very successful. Our household included not only us and our children, but many slaves who served both our family and our business.

We were still raising our children when my husband was hit with a sudden, grave illness and, before we knew it, he was gone and I was a widow. I barely had time to grieve for him because our business needed to continue. So, I worked harder, traveling to new places selling our purple cloth. The pace often felt grueling... but the gods of commerce needed to be appeased.

And then... one day, one trip... things changed. I arrived in a strange town in the middle of a storm, exhausted from the wind and from work, longing only to rest my head. But I discovered the town inn had no room.

I had no connections, no relations in this town, so, for the first time in my life, I was at the mercy of strangers.

I knocked on several doors... and, several times, my plea for hospitality was met with suspicion and a closing door. Until a kind woman named Rebekah answered. She saw desperation in my eyes and I did not even need to tell my story before she gently pulled me inside.

"Come in, come in. Get out of the storm," she said. I explained I was in town for business and asked if they had a place for me to rest for the night.

"You are welcome here," Rebekah replied. "We are about to welcome the Sabbath as our guest. We will have *you* as our guest as well!"

"The *Sabbath*," I asked?

Rebekah began explaining... and I recalled the custom I'd heard about in my travels: the Jewish people – who worshiped the Lord God, the "one, true God," they claimed – practiced the Sabbath on the last day of the week. On the Sabbath, they prayed as families, they worshiped with fellow Jews... *and they did not work. At all.*

I could not imagine! It seemed so impractical. What if you needed to meet a client on the seventh day? What if you had to do accounting from the week? What if you needed to prepare for the *next* week? No work one day each week? Impractical, indeed. But... *wonderful*. A day of rest.

As she introduced me to her family and helped me get settled-in for the evening, Rebekah explained more to me about the Sabbath.

I was enchanted.

“And you have arrived in time for our Sabbath meal,” she said, “the meal where we give thanks to the Lord God for all He has made – and where we give thanks to Him for giving us the gift of the Sabbath.” When the sun was close to setting, we sat at the table to eat. The windstorm continued to rage outside, but there was a delicious, holy calm *inside*.

Rebekah's family filled the table but they welcomed me fully. I watched them carefully so I knew what to do. Rebekah's husband was there, but *she* was the first to speak. She lit the candles... waved her hands above the flames as if inviting the light into her very self... and she offered the most beautiful prayer I had ever heard up to that point: “Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light Sabbath candle[s].”

She blessed the candles. Then they blessed the bread... and the wine. Everything was blessed. The Lord God was thanked *for everything*.

I never saw Rebekah's family again after that trip, but I will never forget how she and her family formally introduced me to the Sabbath... and how, by extension, they introduced me to the Lord God. I had been so used to the gods of my ancestors.

There was a god for everything it seemed: we worshiped *this* god for fertility and *this* god for business... *this* god for weather and *this* god for food. After generations of worshiping so many different competing gods, and after years of so much hard work with little rest, the Lord God and His Sabbath seemed to call me.

So, when I returned home to Philippi, I sought the community of Jews. It was a small community – and there was no house of worship – but there was a community.

Week after week we would gather by the river every Sabbath to study God's law and to worship. And we rested. We rested from our work... and we rested in the knowledge that we were children of the Most High God. My household changed for the better and I was so grateful.

I didn't think we could feel any more blessed until one Sabbath day when three strangers – all of them men – came to our riverside worship.

At first, they stood at a slight distance, listening. One of the men was quite young — hardly older than a youth. Another man, perhaps a bit older, was tall and pale...he hung back and seemed disinclined to speak.

But the man who captured my attention was older still, small of stature, with thinning hair upon his head, a twisted, limping gait... and there was an incredible fire in his eyes... like I'd never seen before or since.

The strangers approached and we looked at them, expectantly, as the man with fiery eyes spoke: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Christ. I am Paul of Tarsus, and these are my companions Timothy and Silas. We are following the leading of a vision granted by the Holy Spirit. We believe the Spirit brought us here to Philippi to share the great Good News with you. Let us tell you about Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, he who is full of grace and truth...”

Time seemed to stand still as Paul went on to tell the story of Jesus... the story of a man who had no need to clothe himself in purple in order to show that he was a king... a man whose royal nature expressed itself in miracles, in healing, in acts of love towards the least of his brothers and sisters. I listened to the story of the one who was the true child of God. I listened, and finally, I knew.

I knew that what I had begun learning about the Sabbath and about the Lord God was somehow complete, *fulfilled*, in this Jesus – this miraculous healer whose death and resurrection promised salvation from sin and hope in all things.

I wanted to know more. I wanted to be part of this Jesus. I wanted to share his message with others. Paul talked about baptism and how baptism was a way to become part of Jesus' death and resurrection – a way into Jesus' work on earth.

I wanted to be baptized! I wanted my children and our servants to be baptized! I wanted our lives to be formed and shaped by this holy Son of God! My heart was so full of love and light that I practically ran home from the river, breathlessly telling my household this glorious good news.

Thanks be to God, they all seemed just as excited as I was. So, we went back to the river... and, one by one, Paul of Tarsus led us into the cold, swirling water... lowering us into it so that we arose, gasping for air, but thoroughly filled with the Holy Breath of God, and dedicating our lives to Jesus the Christ, the Lord God incarnate.

I was so filled with mercy and awe that I invited Paul and his friends to stay with us while he was in Philippi... and that was the start of our church. We supported Paul as he traveled and told others about Jesus.

We continued to learn from him and, by the grace of Jesus, we continued to be compelled to share our homes and wealth with others. Our lives became formed around worship, hospitality, and rest. I recalled the words I'd learned when studying the Jewish law and the stories of their past – Joshua's words, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”³

³ Portions of his “message in monologue” - particularly the middle section – were borrowed with permission (and with my own modifications) from Rev. Patricia Raube. Her original version is found at: <http://magdalenesmusings.blogspot.com/2010/05/at-river-monologue-of-lydia-acts-169-15.html>

Worship, hospitality, generosity, and rest. That is who we knew the God of Jesus our Lord to be... and so my house serves him by embodying those things. It isn't always easy, but it's a beautiful life. And we have Paul to thank for it. If you don't mind, I'd like to leave you with the parting words Paul left for us believers in the Philippian church.

“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.”⁴

May these words ring in your ears and hearts the way they ring in mine.

⁴ Philippians 4: 8-9