

Dwell with Me, Be with Me
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
May 26, 2019

Acts 16:9-15, John 14:23-29

The sun was shining that early summer morning in the Roman city of Philippi. In the next room Lydia heard the sound of her toddler playing with his toys. Outside the city was just waking up. Vendors were gathering, setting out their wares. The birds were singing; the air was already heavy, it was going to be another hot day.

Lydia groaned. She didn't sleep well because of all the tossing and turning. She had gone to bed late and spent most of the night worrying about some new problems with a particularly difficult client.

He said the bolt of cloth she sold him last week was accidentally left out in the rain, and now it appeared more dark grey than purple. He wanted a total replacement, which she would begrudgingly provide, even though the material he returned to her was just fine.

Generally, she enjoyed her job. Being a successful seller of highly valued purple cloth – the kind that was sold throughout Macedonia to those who could afford it, was generally secure.

Yes, Lydia loved her work, but there were times when she simply got fed up with a few of the persnickety rich folk. They always seemed to want a little more attention and time than was reasonable to expect.

Lately, it just seemed like her business took more and more of her energy, resources and time. It had been months since she'd had any real time off, so she had good reason that day to be a little cranky. We can cut her some slack, right?

Just as she was finishing her morning cup of coffee, Lydia's 6-year old daughter came into her room. *"Mommy, are you going to be able to finish the special dress for my birthday party next week?"*

Inwardly, Lydia groaned again. She forgot that she had promised her daughter that. When was she going to find the time to finish that sewing? After reassuring her daughter and sending her out to play, Lydia bent down and stretched.

Her upper back and shoulders were tight, even this early in the morning. As hectic as the last week had been, Lydia had not had time for her daily walks and the tension of life had settled into her body like drying cement.

Tomorrow, several of her friends were coming over to continue their project making clothes for poor widows in the area. It was good work, important work, but Lydia wondered to herself if she had any energy left over for it.

There were the household expenses that needed to be attended to. Time to pay the debts she owed to the shopkeepers in the market. She should have taken care of them last week. Maybe she could get to it today.

Then she remembered; today was the Sabbath. And a part of her cringed; she had so much to do; how could she possibly take any time out? By the time she got herself and her three children dressed and fed and walked across town... well, maybe some of you can relate.

She grabbed her sandals and tied them on. Another part of her eased into a smile; today was time set apart; holy time; time to praise her God; time to be with her community and connect. Time to pray.

She gathered up the children and they made their way down to the side of the river where she and other women gathered weekly. As she sat by the water, Lydia felt her whole body relax. The beauty around her made her heart sing. She felt nurtured by the sound of laughter coming from the children playing on the riverbank. It felt so good to be still. Her heart felt open and joyful.

With a sense of expectancy, she, along with the other women present, began to pray. That's when a couple of men approached the group. One introduced himself as Paul. "*We are followers of Jesus Christ,*" he said. Lydia and her friends asked them to share what that meant.

As she listened to the stories about Jesus of Nazareth, his ministry and the resurrection, she felt something in her respond. It was an invitation to dwell with God in ways she had not yet imagined. She felt an enormous sense of peace come upon her. She asked that she and her household be baptized. Enthusiastic about her this new hope she felt, she invited her new friends to be guests at her home. She would simply not take "no" for an answer.

And Lydia's life was transformed that morning.

Not because she worked harder,
Or made a cranky client happy,

not because she sewed her daughter's dress,
Or paid the bills or made clothes for the less fortunate.

Her life was changed because she made time to dwell with God.

And in that time, with her heart open, she heard a "*new word*" and had an experience of how different life could be.

We live in a culture that is always on the move. We seldom stop long enough to see where we are; our focus tends to be on where we are going and how we're going to get there.

And I'm wondering, more and more, if American Trappist monk Thomas Merton was right when he said these words...

"The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence."

These heavy words say something important about the temptations that surround us all daily. Relationships require attentiveness if they are to thrive. "*Be still and know that I am God,*" says the psalmist.

To commune with the divine, to discover and be discovered by God is a deeply human desire, but it can also be uncomfortable. What might we come to know - about ourselves, our relationships, our world, our faith?

Lydia, even in the midst of her busy life, took time out to be in prayer, to be in community, to listen for God's voice and her life was transformed. She honored the vital importance of Sabbath time to rest in God's arms trusting that the rest of her life would be taken care of in due time.

Lydia embodies the hunger of someone who senses there is more to life than what they presently, personally experience. Today we might say that she "hungers for meaning in her life."

The search meant more to her than money and success, more than the bit of power and influence she enjoyed. When Lydia joined the other women down there by the river, this wealthy, powerful woman left her circles of influence and went out to the margins of her society, joining those who undoubtedly had far less than she did. When she encountered the gospel in the words of Paul and Silas, Lydia found everything she had been seeking, everything she had hungered for, even if she could not quite name it.

Lydia responded to the gospel with actions, with commitment, first in being baptized and then by insisting on exercising the great, foundational Christian virtue of hospitality, the expression of God's own grace and welcome, to the preachers themselves. In her own way, she was preaching to the preachers, through her actions.

The story of Lydia is a story about the early church, about mission, about discernment, about hospitality, community, and, of course, the experience of women in the church, often at its edges but never without impact.

She evokes the memory of women through the centuries in many different settings, our foremothers in faith, who didn't let their marginalization stop them from being powerhouses for advancing the mission of the gospel in their own time.

The beauty of this story is how well it illustrates what Paul later writes in his letter to the Galatians, when he emphatically quotes the baptismal formula used by the very early, early Christians: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."*

When Paul baptized Lydia and her entire household that day down by the river, we can just imagine him using those very words as he welcomed a new sister to the family of God.

As we embark on God's mission in our day and in our own setting as well as around the world, we are more – together - than simply the sum of our parts: we are the Body of Christ active, at work, in the world that God loves.

The power of this community exists not just in the stories of long ago, but in the relationships of all of us here in the church, each and every one of us, in our rich diversity, our unique stories and gifts, and our visions, too, opening our hearts and listening for God's leading.

In two weeks we will celebrate Pentecost, acknowledging the power of the Holy Spirit to move through our lives, creating new possibilities for God's expression. All we need do is to open our hearts and listen for which way the breath of the Holy Spirit is guiding us. Each one of us is called to come and dwell in God's loving presence. May we answer that call by making time and space in our lives. Amen.