

PURPLE PASSION: THE CONVERSION OF LYDIA

Acts 16:11-15

May 9, 2010

Although you might think I have TCU motives in wearing this purple dress today, this is one time I do not. This is the beautiful bridesmaid's dress that I wore on the occasion of the wedding of my brother, Ralph, to his wonderful wife, Ellyn, the mother of my precious nieces Sarah and Angela. I'm wearing this in honor of Ellyn, and to honor all mothers of every kind who make a difference in their families and in our world, like the woman in today's scripture named Lydia—who was a mother of a very different sort, and known as the seller of purple.

Our scripture introduces us to Lydia as a wealthy businesswoman of some repute in the Macedonian town of Philippi, an important city in the Roman empire, located in what is now modern day Greece. It was in Philippi in the year 42 BCE that Mark Antony and Octavius defeated in battle Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar. It was in Philippi that Brutus and Cassius took their own lives. "E tu, Brute?"

Eighty years later after that violent history, Lydia walked the same streets as those immortalized in one of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies. Everyone she passed knew her as the woman who had grown wealthy because of her technique of creating purple dye.

Of all the colors used to dye clothing, purple was the most difficult to come by. First, one must collect large quantities of a certain salt-water mollusk. Second, each shell must be cracked, and a small gland removed from the neck of the mollusk. When the gland was crushed, a milk-like fluid was emitted that would turn purple or scarlet when reaching the air. Now we can all imagine that the gland of a mollusk is not usually very large, so just think of how many mollusks a person would have to collect in order to dye just one piece of cloth! (from *The Dictionary of the Bible*. J.D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, ed., Zondervan. 1963).

Because it was such a difficult process, purple dye was extremely rare, and thereby costly. Only the wealthiest could afford it, and that's why it became the color of kings and queens. Lydia had made her fortune in Philippi because of

her expertise in developing the purple dye and supplying Roman Senators and Caesars with the luscious color that set them apart from the masses.

Besides the fact that she was a wealthy businesswoman, we don't know much else about Lydia's history. She is known simply as the seller of purple. But the gospel writer, Luke, gives us a brief insight into one particular moment of her life—her conversion to follow Jesus Christ after hearing the faith story of the Apostle Paul.

This was Paul's first foray into Europe. Born in Tarsus, in what is modern-day Turkey, to this point, Paul's first missionary journey was to places with which he was familiar in Asia Minor. But on this, his second journey, he moved away from familiar territory to travel to places far away from home—far away even from Jerusalem.

It was a good bet that the people in Philippi had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth. The Philippians so strongly associated with Rome that there was not even a Jewish synagogue in town—only temples to Jupiter and Juno and other Roman gods and goddesses.

A small group of Philippian women who had some affiliation with the Jewish faith would meet by the river Gangitas on the Sabbath. It was there that Paul and Luke found a willing audience to share about the power of God made manifest in Jesus. It was down by the riverside that Lydia's heart was moved to accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and Paul baptized her.

Lydia was the first European convert to Christianity, and her home became the first house church on that continent. She became "the Mother of Christianity" in Europe.

For 21st century ears, this scant message from the author Luke may not seem any big deal. But to first century hearers of this event, this was a shocking report.

Why? Because Paul had been brought up as a good and proper Jew. He had been trained that men do not converse with women in the same way they would with other men. Before coming to Philippi, Paul had been called on the carpet

by the leaders of the Jerusalem church who were not happy that in his missionary zeal he was inviting uncircumcised Gentiles to become Christian.

And yet, here he was doing it again in Philippi, this time baptizing a *single woman* and helping her to start a church out of her home. Paul was breaking too many of the understood codes of conduct in his evangelistic fervor. What on earth compelled Paul to keep pushing the envelope of tolerance and acceptability?

And what about Lydia herself? She was a woman who seemingly had everything—material comfort, a home large enough to house guests, and servants. No word of a husband or children. She might have been a widow, but Luke probably would have said as much in his meticulous way. Most likely, she was a rarity in that culture, a single, successful businesswoman. What was it in Paul's witness that attracted her to Jesus' cause to put her life and her estate at risk, especially since the early Christians were not favored in the Roman empire?

This morning, I want us to catch a glimpse of the power of the Jesus project as experienced by those first believers. We've lost a bit of that in our culture. We've domesticated Christ so that his words of love are like the affection from our pet dog or cat. We've lost the powerful passion that they evoked for those early followers that caused them to break the rules of polite society and step beyond the boundaries that divided people from each other.

Our text this morning invites us to see how we can recapture that passion that was both Paul's and Lydia's—a royal, purple passion for the Prince of Peace who is Jesus the Christ. The author Luke also lays out a method in three parts by which we can share our passion for Christ with those who need to hear it. Let's spend a few moments considering that method for ourselves.

First, Luke tells that Paul sat down for conversation with the women and shared his faith story. Admittedly, Paul had a very powerful one. He didn't have to make anything up—nor did he have to have a seminary degree from the Jerusalem Seminary, although Paul was definitely well educated. He shared from his heart about how knowing about Jesus changed his life for the better, transforming him on the road to Damascus from a killer of Christians to a

follower who offered a new and better life to everyone with ears to hear. He shared without hesitation, because he had Good News to offer to people who badly needed to hear it.

I wonder, how many of us here this morning have ever given intentional thought about what is Good News in our own personal faith stories? Why on earth do you still claim Christianity in a world that really doesn't care what religion you follow? What difference has being a Christian meant to your life--really?

We all have our own unique and individual story to share, otherwise we wouldn't be here this morning. It doesn't have to be a dramatic conversion experience like Paul's in order for it to be valid—it just has to be genuinely ours, from our heart. Each one of us has been touched by the good news of Jesus Christ in some way—we just need to bring that experience to words that we can share with others who need to hear it.

So one of the first steps in Paul's methodology of changing lives is to know and share your own faith story.

Then there's a second step. Once we have figured out what we have to share, we have to figure out where we want to share it, and with whom we identify needs to hear it. In this morning's text, we hear about Paul choosing to go to a place that was not only out of his comfort zone, but also not a societally acceptable place for a man of his stature to hang out.

Where are those places for us?

Last week, in his address to the North Texas Area Assembly, our Area Minister Larry Ross remarked that for too long, Christians have abided within unspoken boundaries that it is impolite—and maybe even un-Christian—to talk about the big four topics that are a part of the larger culture's conversation—Money, Sex, Politics, and Religion. Just think about any television talk-show, or drama, or even sitcom, and you'll notice how all four of these are front and center in the message being shared. (see the home page of our www.ntaccsw.org to hear Larry's whole sermon.)

Larry acknowledge that because these topics are so divisive, many of us are afraid to talk about them lest we end up angry with one another and break off relationships. Most Christians want to foster unity, and so we have refrained from entering into the fray that these topics might induce. But because Christians have feared to enter into those conversations, the larger culture has not had the influence of Christ's power and wisdom to guide and direct.

Larry challenged us all that it is time to step out of our fear and to join in the conversation—to learn to listen to another's story even though his or hers might be quite different from our own. Then we are called to share the Good News from our own perspective. He remarked that in the larger culture it is considered rude if you don't listen to the other side after sharing your own. If James Carville, a far-left Democrat, and Mary Matalin, a far-right Republican pundit, can stay married—why can't we all give it a try?

This morning, I'd like for us to think about those places where we would not usually step outside our comfort zone to share our faithstory, to identify those people who need to hear what a difference Christ has made in us.

Could it be around lunch tables with our friends at the club? Or maybe going to a gay bar and offering the invitation of Christ's love to those who have felt excluded? Or maybe at the corner where East Grand, Gaston and Garland Rd come together where on most days a homeless person begs for money?

Our text today challenges us to think outside the box of societal politeness and political correctness and to go to those people and places that need to experience the invitation into the Good News of Jesus Christ. We are called to dive into a conversation where the Holy Spirit might change us as well as others.

Just as Paul did with Lydia. We don't know why the woman who "had it all" materially was truly changed by Paul's words, but she was. Maybe it was because she realized that money isn't everything—that there was still something more meaningful that she was missing in her life.

And it is through Lydia that Luke offers us yet another way to share the Good News in our story this morning. Unlike Paul, the author Luke tells us that once

Lydia became a Christian, she went to those whom she knew best—those who lived in her house—and shared her heart with them so that they too, were touched by the presence of Christ.

The word I hear from the text today is this: Become familiar with your own faithstory—familiar enough that you can share it. Then determine with whom you want to share. There are some of us, like Paul, who are called and gifted to go to strangers and share Good News. There are some of us, like Lydia, who do our best work with the people who are familiar, who know us and love us, like mothers who teach their children early on the story of Jesus.

Jimmy Cash grew up on a small farm outside Hamilton, Mo. His mother was a devout woman born of a genteel southern family, but she married a poor farmer and unsalaried Baptist minister. They were so poor that when Jimmy Cash was 8, his father told him he'd have to earn his own money for whatever clothes he needed. At the time, J C, as he was called, had 2.50 saved from running errands, collecting and selling junk. He invested his money in pigs, which he later sold for a profit. He was able to buy his shoes and clothing on his own from that time on.

After high school, JC moved to Denver where he worked at Joslin's Dry Goods store, making \$6 a week. He got married, and he and his wife began their own retail business. His first goal to make \$100,000 was soon met, and he worked tirelessly to realize his second goal—to become a millionaire.

But one day, JC's wife died. She had caught a cold that moved into pneumonia. JC remembers, "When she died, my world crashed about me. To build a business, to make a success in the eyes of men, to accumulate money—what was the purpose of my life? What had money meant for my wife? I felt mocked life, even by God."

At his lowest moment, JC remembered the teachings of his mother. He had left the church many years before. He had been just too busy. He had hardly given any thought to his spiritual life—there was too much to think about and too much to do to waste time considering religion and God.

But his grief forced him to his knees, and through his tears he remembered the comforting voice of his mother reciting psalms and telling him the stories of Jesus. After reconnecting with a congregation near him, he returned to his work, and eventually did become a millionaire. But that's not where his passion was.

Later JC Penny wrote about that time: "I had to pass through fiery ordeals before reaching glimmerings of conviction that it is not enough for men to be simply upright and moral. When I was brought to humility and the knowledge of dependence on God, sincerely and earnestly seeking God's aid, it was forthcoming, and a light illumined my being. I cannot otherwise describe it than to say that it change me as a man." And though he's best known for the retail store from which most of us has shopped at one time or another, JC Penny continued to find his passion through his faith, making a difference in a world—and all because of he remembered the stories told him from his mother and father. (From JC Penny website/history and *Illustrations Unlimited*. Tyndale Press. 1988. pg. 49)

May we celebrate the faith stories told to us by our mother's today, and continue to share the Good News that changes the world.

Amen