

John 5:1-9
Acts 16:9-15

“Lydia’s Children”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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13 May 2007
Easter 6

This story in John is so true to life – even humorous – that it almost had to have happened just that way. I’m pretty sure I know this guy by the Bethesda Pool. The pool at Bethesda, believed to have healing powers for the first one in the water when the spring stirred it up, attracted a lot of people. I am reminded of the Santuario de Chimayo in New Mexico, with the healing spring, which I talked about on Easter, if you were here. Usually, in healing stories, the ailing person believes in Jesus, and Jesus sends them on their way with some statement like: “Go in peace; your faith has made you well.”

Not this time. This man doesn’t believe in Jesus, doesn’t know where his healing comes from, doesn’t even answer Jesus’ question, “Do you want to be healed?” “Do you *want* to be healed?” He simply launches into his litany of complaint. He lies a few feet from what he thinks will be able to heal him, unable to cross that short distance with some help. And perhaps long years ago he has given into the cynicism which saves him from the more bitter heartbreak of hope unmet.

(This is the sort of thing that gave rise, in Sierra Blanca Presbytery where I worked before, to the policy “No Sniveling.” It’s on their website.) After the healing, he doesn’t even know Jesus. Jesus heals him anyway.

Most of the world is that way – beneficiaries of the grace of God and God’s providence, not even knowing where it comes from. Even in the church, among the faithful, there is much we take for granted. No one in this room (or anywhere else) gets credit for their own faith. It was a gift. We inherited it. It was passed on to us.

I remember this when I hear of congregations in the denomination today who are in conflict, where the current majority of members, in the current generation, wants to break away, take their property with them, and leave the family – for whatever reason has their button punched. Central Presbyterian in Huntsville is attempting this right now, and it could be a precedent setting case if the issue over church property goes to trial. It’s all about them you know. And they’ve forgotten that *they* didn’t put that building there – they inherited it from generation upon generation of faithful Presbyterians who sacrificed and gave to established the Reformed presence there.

Here in downtown Birmingham, we remember this, I hope. We were the very first church in Birmingham. And I am reminded of those who have gone before, not only when I come and sit in this sanctuary (a place so beautiful that this TV crew from Chicago wanted shots here to show where the Birmingham faithful worship); I am also reminded of our inheritance when we have to do yet one more pricey repair on an 1888 building! We wouldn’t be here without the sacrificial giving of previous generations of Christians, of Presbyterian Christians, who passed it on to us.

The Acts 16 passage recounts Paul’s dream of a Macedonian man saying, “Come help us!” So he goes. Paul and his companions took passage on a ship to Phillipi, a leading city in

Macedonia, a Roman colony, a retirement community (often) for Roman legionnaires and senators. Later it would become one of Paul's favorite congregations. But in the beginning it had to be an uncomfortable place to be in church work – there was not even a Jewish community there, not even a synagogue. In such places Jews would often gather by the river – a reminder of God's live-giving grace.

Searching by the river for someone to pray with, Paul comes across Lydia, his first convert within what is Rome proper (not an outlying territory as was Palestine). Paul's vision was just a little off, a Macedonian man saying "Come help us." When he got there, it was a woman.

Paul did the unheard-of – sat and talked with Lydia and the women there just as a Rabbi would *do*. But in a way very contrary to Pharasaic traditions, within which there was a saying: "Everyone who talks much with a woman causes evil to himself and his end is in Gehenna (hell)." But Paul is a changed man since God knocked him down on the Damascus road. Paul is the man who will write in Galatians 3:28, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, but all are one in Christ Jesus and heirs of Abraham according to promise."

Lydia, his first baptism in the Empire itself, is either wealthy or hung out with the wealthy. She is a businesswoman, a retailer of purple cloth, which could only be worn by Roman nobility. When she made the decision to be baptized her whole family was baptized as well – which was custom when the head of household took a new religion. And her place became a house church, and the first Christian outpost in the heart of the Empire.

No wonder we see so many "Lydia Circles" within the Presbyterian Women's organization!

Now if we read on, we discover Paul's first two significant encounters in this part of the Roman Empire were with women. We'll talk more about the other person in next week's sermon. Today we will observe that the first was Lydia, a wealthy businesswoman. The second was a slave-girl, troubles and oppressed. One rich, one poor.

It is a sign of the times – somebody's times, those times and ours, or a sign of the human disposition, that in the story the slave-girl is not given a name. But nothing in the Biblical text is there by accident, and these two stories are paired just as these woman are paired – the wealthy and the poor, the named and the nameless, both our spiritual ancestors. Our mothers. The church is not confined. It is for everyone.

Early evangelism efforts in Europe were always to the women in the Germanic and Celtic villages. If the women came, the men would follow. (That's the only reason I went to the traveling revivals which came through town when I was in high school; that's where the girls were!)

We inherit the faith. The Apostle Paul wrote to his protégé, Timothy (2 Tim. 1:5): "I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which lived first in your grandmother Lois, and in your mother, Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives also in you."

In a narcissistic age, this is a good thing to remember. We are not, ourselves, the center of the universe. Indeed, most profound and transcendent things we inherit from the saints gone before. In an age of entertaining, sound-bite theology, it is tempting to quote Jesus to Central church in Huntsville : “God can make children for Abraham out of these stones.” But for our quiet, steady, intellectual, Reformed faith, perhaps it is better to remember and thank Lydia. And Lois and Eunice.

Alastair McIntyre writes that we enter this life on a stage we did not build, playing a role we did not create. We are major players in our own life story, and have minor parts in that of others, but we still inherit the role. We inherit the faith, from those gone before, and we owe it to generations yet to come. We are part of a continuum, a long line of Lydia’s children, that stretches behind us and before us. It is in our hands as a stewardship, for transmission to the next generation.

So here’s the point, on Mother’s Day – we are Lydia’s children. And the slave-girl’s. And we need each other. We are the family of Christ. And even at times when faith is weak, when maybe we *don’t* believe, the family of faith believes *for* us. When we have burdens we can’t carry, the family of faith carries them *for* us. When we are too lost, too sick, to pray, the family of faith prays *for* us.

There’s a song by Steve Goodman, about an aging Dutchman who has dementia, and is prone to wanders away from his house until his wife comes and finds him to bring him home. He sings, “*Let us go to the banks of the ocean, where the walls rise above the Zuider Zee. Long ago, I used to be a young man, and dear Margaret remembers that for me.*”

There are things we have to remember for each other – especially when the world around us tells a different message about the value of human life, or who we are. And here in the body of Christ, we remember *for* one another what are the most true things.

This must be why this church has made a home *for* the homeless, taken a posture in this city of being a voice *for* the voiceless, exercises our influence *for* the powerless ...

because Christ was crucified and risen *for* us. And Lydia passed it on.

Thanks be to God for the communion of saints.