

An Open Heart: Lydia's Gift to the Gospel

Acts 16:9–15

Introduction

Have you ever had a friend that you'd describe as... unlikely?

And by that I mean, in every possible way you can't quite figure out how you ever became friends.

Your backgrounds are different. Your life experiences are worlds apart. You grew up speaking different languages, eating different food, navigating different worlds. The social forces of the world might say you have no reason to connect—yet somehow, you did.

I read about one such friendship not too long ago.

He was a teenage volunteer at a nursing home on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She was a wheelchair-bound resident in her nineties.

He was a poor Hispanic teen, living in a rented room, separated from his family, trying to figure out his way in the world.

She had lived a comfortable life, with regular visits from her daughters and grandchildren, carrying memories of vacations, family dinners, and a life before arthritis slowed her down.

When Margaret Oliver's daughter hired Elvis Checo to look in on her mother a few afternoons a week, nobody anticipated that this would be the beginning of a beautiful friendship. But it was.

What began as a job turned into a lifeline—for both of them.

They became constant companions—laughing together at old stories, swapping music, watching

TV shows side by side, learning bits of each other's language, caring for one another across every possible barrier of age, culture, and life experience.

That's one kind of unlikely friendship—sweet, surprising, and life-giving.
But sometimes unlikely friendships form in places far darker.

Think of *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.

It's the story of Bruno, the young son of a Nazi commandant, and Shmuel, a Jewish boy imprisoned in a concentration camp.

One boy lives in privilege, the other in unthinkable suffering. Everything about their world is designed to keep them apart—not just apart, but to make them enemies.

And yet, they meet at the fence. They share food. They talk. They laugh. They find in each other a friend.

The contrast between these two stories is striking—one is lighthearted and safe, the other dangerous and heartbreaking.

But in both, the friendship crosses lines the world says you shouldn't cross.

And in both, what makes the friendship possible is the same thing—an **open heart**.

And yet—they had everything that mattered in common: a shared humanity, a mutual care, and a willingness to let someone unexpected into their lives.

And I wonder—what makes relationships like that possible?

It's not shared hobbies, or matching social circles, or even common backgrounds.

The answer, I believe, is an open heart.

An open heart has room for surprise.

An open heart makes space for the stranger.

An open heart says, *"I'm willing to learn from you, even if the world says we don't belong together."*

—— **The Unlikely Encounter**

Today in Acts 16, we meet Lydia—a woman whose open heart not only built an unlikely friendship with Paul, but also helped spark the spread of the gospel into Europe.

Our scripture begins with Paul's vision—he sees a man of Macedonia pleading with him: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul and his companions set sail, arriving in Philippi.

It's the Sabbath, and Paul and his team go looking for a Jewish synagogue. There isn't one. Not enough Jewish men live there to form one. But they hear of a place outside the city gates, down by the river, where a group gathers for prayer.

That's where they meet Lydia.

Luke tells us she's a *worshiper of God*. In those days, that meant she revered the God of Israel but wasn't fully Jewish—she didn't follow all the laws, like circumcision, so she lived on the religious margins. We might say today she was "spiritual but not religious."

She's also:

- A woman leading a prayer gathering.
- The head of her own household.
- From Thyatira, a foreigner in Philippi.
- A dealer in purple cloth—a successful businesswoman in the first century, financially independent in a world where most women weren't.

Everything about her identity makes this meeting with Paul unlikely. But here they are—Paul, the traveling evangelist, and Lydia, the foreign, independent woman—by the river. And what

makes the difference?

Verse 14 says: *“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”*

—An Open Heart – The Core Spiritual Practice—

I want to pause on that verse —because I think it’s the center of this whole story.

What does it mean to have an open heart?

Ask the congregation?

A **closed heart** is defensive. It’s fearful. It’s when one is convinced my way is the right way, my experience is the only valid one, my faith doesn’t need to change.

It’s quick to dismiss, quick to judge, quick to protect rather than connect.

An **open heart** is different.

It’s gracious and forgiving.

It’s willing to welcome the stranger, to listen to voices outside our normal circle.

It assumes others have something to teach us.

It is humble enough to say, *“I don’t know it all—and God might still surprise me.”*

And here’s what’s so striking about Lydia—she could have easily closed her heart to Paul. She already had her own faith, her own leadership role, her own prayer meeting. She could have thought, *“Thanks, but I’m fine.”* But she didn’t. She listened eagerly. She let the Spirit in.

Catholic priest Richard Rohr says that the work of spirituality is to keep your heart space open. You can read, you can study scripture, you can pile up all the religious knowledge in the world, but if it never travels from your head to your heart, it won't transform you.

And friends, you don't have to look far to see what a closed heart looks like in our world today. We see it in the way we talk past each other online. We see it in political discourse. We see it in the growing fear of diversity. A closed heart shuts the door before the conversation even begins. An open heart? It makes room. It refuses to let fear have the final say. It's willing to risk relationship even when it's uncomfortable. And that's what our world is starving for right now—people who will choose openness over suspicion, connection over isolation, curiosity over judgment.

—this is daily work. Because the temptation is always to close down: to judge, to dismiss, to fear. And if you don't have some spiritual practice to keep your heart open, it's easy to end up bitter, cynical, and small.

Now I'm not the wise one...but I can point you towards others who are wise. And Richard Rohr is one of those people for me. So if there is one thing you are going to remember from the sermon today, remember these words from him:

True Spirituality is about keeping your heart space open. It is daily, constant work. The temptation is to close down: to judge and dismiss and hate and fear. If you don't have some spiritual practice that keeps your heart open it's easy to end up grumpy and filled with fear and negativity. You have to work to live in love, to have a generosity of spirit, a

readiness to smile, a willingness to serve. Regularly check in with yourself, asking “Is my heart open? Is love flowing through me? Or am I constricted? Any time you feel like you deserve something, it’s an indication you may be hoarding love rather than letting come and go freely.

-Spiritual Practices to Keep the Heart Open-

So how do we do it? How do we keep our hearts open in a world that constantly tempts us to close them?

It takes intentional practice:

- **Centering Prayer-** that isn’t about words but about stilling the heart & mind— asking, “God, what do you want to show me today?”
- **Scripture that stretches us** – not just confirming what we already believe, but challenging us.
- **Daily self-examination** – daily reflecting with, “Where did my heart close today? Where did I say no to love?” Where did I
- **Relationships across difference** – intentionally spending time with people whose life experiences are not like ours.

An open heart is like a muscle—if you don’t use it, it tightens.

—The Outflow – Radical Hospitality

Here's the thing—open hearts don't just change how we *feel*. They change how we *live*.

For Lydia, her open heart led directly to radical hospitality. She and her household were baptized, and she insisted that Paul and Silas stay in her home. And this wasn't a quiet, behind-the-scenes act. Inviting strange men—foreign missionaries—into her home would have turned heads. It was risky. But that's what an open heart does—it welcomes, it makes room, it says “there's space for you at my table.”

Later in Acts, after Paul and Silas are jailed for their preaching, where do they go when they're released? Back to Lydia's house.

Her home became a hub for the gospel in Philippi.

In 2025, radical hospitality might not mean hosting traveling missionaries, but the principle is the same.

It might look like:

- Inviting a neighbor for dinner even though you've barely spoken before.
- Making room in at your table for someone whose presence challenges you.
- Supporting housing solutions in your community because everyone deserves a safe place to rest.

Hospitality matters because it's one of the most tangible signs of the gospel. In a culture that prizes privacy and self-protection, opening your door—and your life—is a countercultural act of trust. It says, *“There is enough room here for you. You belong.”*

Lydia's home became the gathering place for the Philippian church. Our tables, our living rooms, our church could be that place for someone else.

-Lydia's Role in the Gospel Story-

Lydia is remembered as the first recorded European convert to Christianity. But just as important—she's a reminder that ministry doesn't happen without people like her. Paul and Silas may be the ones traveling and preaching, but their work is sustained by the hospitality, generosity, and steadfastness of people like Lydia.

And I can't help but think—there are still Lydia roles in the church today. Not everyone is called to stand up front and preach or to travel and teach. But every Paul needs a Lydia. Every public ministry needs private support. And the truth is—without Lydia, the gospel in Philippi might not have taken root the way it did.

-Connection & Call to Action-

We've been in this *Faces of Faith* series, looking at bold, often untold stories in scripture:

- Shiphrah & Puah—midwives who defied Pharaoh.
- The daughters of Zelophehad—who stood up for justice.

- Queen Vashti—who said “no” to the king to exploitation.
- The thief on the cross—who recognized Jesus even in suffering.
- And now Lydia—whose open heart and radical hospitality supported the spread of the gospel.

Each one plays a different role in God’s story of redemption and grace. And the same is true today.

So—what about you?

Maybe your role seems small, but I promise—it’s not.

Because an open heart changes lives.

An open heart changes communities.

An open heart can change the world.

Which faces of faith story have you resonated most with over the summer? What might your role be in all this?

—Closing

So this week—

Keep your heart open.

Step outside your usual circle.

Welcome someone who doesn’t look like you, live like you, or believe exactly like you.

And see what God might do.

