

LYDIA: MOTHER OF THE CHURCH

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Dean Feldmeyer

IN THE CITY OF PHILIPPI

In about 50 CE the Apostle, Paul, began his second missionary journey to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. He left Jerusalem with Silas, Luke and Timothy and followed the coast of the Mediterranean Sea north through Samaria and Syria, around and west through Asia Minor (Turkey) and, finally into northern Greece.

At that time, modern day northern Greece was a Roman colony known as Macedonia and near the coast was a little town called Philippi.

Philippi had been founded in about 358 BCE by Phillip II, king of Macedonia and father of Alexander the Great. The Royal Route, a road that dissected Macedonia from east to west, ran through a narrow passage between a mountain and a swamp at that site and Philip was anxious to make sure the passage was secure. He had a fortress built and left some soldiers to occupy it. Later, he offered citizens incentives to move there and create a colony.

When Alexander became king, he decided to drain part of the swamp and, when he did, gold deposits were discovered. He sent miners to the area and mines were dug and gold quickly became Philippi's main claim to fame. Even with all that gold, however, the city never had more than about 2000 occupants until the Roman Empire.

Philippi sort of falls off the historic landscape, a small mining town of no real significance, until 42 BC.

At that time, Rome was embroiled in civil war. Cassius and Brutus led a revolution in the senate and assassinated Julius Caesar. When Octavian (Caesar's adopted son) and Mark Antony did not join the revolution, the conspirators fled to Greece where they raised an army of local Greek partisans and veteran Roman soldiers who were loyal to them.

In 42 CE Octavian and Mark Antony, who had not previously been on friendly terms, joined forces against the combined armies of Cassius and Brutus. They met in two battles -- about 100,000 soldiers on each side -- on the plain that had once been a swamp just southeast of the city of Philippi, the first battle on October 3 and the second on October 23. In all, about 27,000 men died in the first battle. Casualties in the second are unknown.

Octavian and Mark Antony were victorious, and the civil war was, effectively ended.

Octavian, who would soon take the name Augustus Caesar, realized that the narrow passage between swamp and mountain were strategically important so he determined to improve and develop the area. He immediately released about 30,000 of his soldiers from active duty and offered incentives for them to stay and live in the area, many of whom did. Later, he would widen and repave the old Royal Road that dissected the area, continue to drain the swamp, and re-open the gold mines.

As with most Roman towns, a small theater and a sports arena were added as well as a forum in the area that had previously been the Greek acropolis. And of course, temples were built to various Roman deities, some of the nicest places of worship in all of Rome, we are told.

Even with this influx of human resources, however, Philippi remained a small town. Historians believe that under Augustus it never grew to much more than 10,000 residents but it was always a wealthy and commercially successful town thanks to the gold mines, its location on an important and heavily traveled road, and its relative proximity to the Aegean Sea.

Philippi would probably have drifted off into obscurity when the mines eventually played out except for one significant event which happened a hundred years after the Battle of Philippi in 50 CE.

That was the year that four guys named Paul, Silas, Luke and Timothy happened to wander into town.

THE MISSIONARIES ARRIVE

Sometime in the winter of 49-50 CE Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke entered Philippi with their message of salvation through Jesus Christ.

As was their custom, they looked for the Jewish synagogue. There, they hoped to find fellow Jews to whom they could preach their message and, more importantly, they would find those righteous gentiles who had accepted the tenets of Judaism but, for one reason or another, were not allowed to fully enter the Jewish faith. (Fertile and receptive ground, indeed, for the spreading of the inclusive gospel!)

Much to their surprise, however, Paul and his friends found no significant Jewish presence in Philippi. No temple, no synagogue, nothing. This was a thoroughly Roman town. Pagan to the core and a tough nut to crack. After spending a couple of unfruitful days in the town Paul decided to try one more thing before he left.

Most Roman cities were built on or near rivers and Philippi was no different; there was a little river called the Ganga that flowed just past the town. Often, in such towns, where there was no significant Jewish population, the few Jews who lived there would gather on the bank of the local river on the Sabbath to pray together.

So, having tried everything else, our four intrepid missionaries went down to the river on Saturday morning and, sure enough, there was a small group of Jewish women who had gathered there to pray.

One of the women, however, was not a Jewess.

Her name was Lydia. She was a Greek woman, a gentile, a pagan, and a native of the town of Thyatira, about 100 miles southeast of Philippi in Asia Minor (Turkey). She was a wealthy businesswoman, a merchant who bought and sold purple cloth. (Purple cloth was very expensive as the dye came from the eggs of small bugs and had to be gathered by hand.) She had joined these Jewish women for their prayers but had not been fully accepted and integrated into the group because she was a gentile. She was only marginally involved.

Paul invited himself and Silas into the group, sat down with the women, and began to tell them about Jesus.

It was Lydia – rich and successful yet excluded because she was a gentile – who heard and responded to the Good News.

THE FIRST CONVERSION IN EUROPE

Lydia was so taken with Paul's message that she asked him to baptize her and, come to think of it, everyone in her household – children, slaves, employees, everyone.

And then she did a strange thing – she issued an invitation to Paul that was also a challenge. “If you have judged me to be honest and sincere in my conversion,” she said to him. “Then come and stay at my home.”

A couple of things here:

First, Paul and Silas were Jewish men and Jewish men steered very clear of gentiles and women, both of which Lydia was. (Luke was, himself, a gentile and Timothy was the product of a mixed marriage, half Jewish and half gentile, so it wasn't quite the problem for them.) Paul and Silas, however, may have had a moment's pause.

They had pretty much overcome their aversion to gentiles. They were traveling with one, weren't they? But a gentile woman something altogether different.

Yet, she had put her invitation in the form of a challenge. “If you have judged me to be an authentic Christian,” she had said. To say no to her would be to deny the authenticity of her faith and the efficacy of her baptism. So, the four of them stepped outside their comfort zones – something they had become pretty adept at doing on their missionary journeys – and they went to her home and stayed there for several days, helping her start a community of Christian believers, what would come to be called a church.

They also went on trying to preach about Jesus in the city and they got into a spot of trouble that we will talk about in detail next Sunday. For now, just know that Paul and Silas ended up being beaten and thrown in jail. A week later, when they got out of jail they decided to go to Lydia's house and there they discovered that the new Christian church was in full swing, already a healthy and promising community of faith. After speaking a few words of encouragement, they took their leave and headed off to Thessalonica.

Now, we don't hear about Lydia again except indirectly.

Eleven years later, in about 61CE Paul has been arrested and is under house arrest in Rome. A member of the Philippian church, a man named Epaphroditus (ee-PAF-ro-DITE-us), has arrived with a gift of money which Paul desperately needs to meet his living expenses as he is not allowed to leave the house.

Paul pens the letter to the Philippians for Epaphroditus to take back with him and in it he thanks them for their generosity not just in this instance but on other occasions as well. The Philippian church, it turns out, is a wealthy church (remember those gold mines?) and they, under Lydia's

leadership, have been financing the bulk of Paul's journeys and ministries. Most scholars, today, believe that it was Lydia herself who was probably writing the big checks.

(So important is this and so affectionate is the letter, that even though Lydia is never mentioned by name, some scholars have read more than just friendship into his relationship with her. That is, of course, pure speculation without even a trace of actual evidence to support it. But sometimes it's fun to speculate.)

At any rate, Lydia has entered the history of Christianity as the first European Christian and the church which started in her house was the first Christian church in Europe.

EPILOGUE: THE HISTORY OF PHILIPPI

By 599 CE at least seven large Christian churches had been built in the city, many of which were basilicas that rivaled any in Thessalonica or even Constantinople. Around that time, however, three tragedies struck the city. First was the invasion of the Visigoths who, unable to take the fortress city itself, burned the surrounding area and destroyed any agricultural economy that existed in the region. Secondly, the entire area was struck with a deadly plague called the Plague of Justinian, which took the lives of more than 20 percent of the population. Then, in 619 CE the city was destroyed by an earthquake and it never recovered.

Today, the city of Philippi is one of the most important archeological sites in all of Christendom and contains some of the most spectacular ruins of early Christianity in the world. The Greek national park system runs tours there every day and it is considered a "must see" for Christians who visit the country.

LESSONS FROM LYDIA

Well, it's an interesting story and one that we, as Christians, should know. But what lessons can we take from it? Several things come to mind.

FIRST, let us consider the city itself. Philippi was a backwater, a small town, fairly unimportant in the grand scheme of things. There was some wealth there but not enough to really put it on the map.

True, in today's lesson, Luke describes it as "a major city in the area" but this says more about the area than it does about the city. Philippi was never a major city. And it was a thoroughly pagan city. They worshipped idols there. There was no synagogue, no church. Nothing but money and the pagan Gods who promised to provide more of it.

Yet Paul decided that it was important enough to not just pass through, but to stay and spread the gospel. ***There is no place on earth that is not important. We are not allowed to write anyone off. All of God's children deserve the opportunity to hear and respond to his Good News of salvation. Through God's forgiveness, and acceptance.***

SECONDLY, let us note that our four intrepid missionaries did not stay at home and wait for the Philippians to show up at their church. ***They went to Philippi.***

There is a trend in modern, western Christianity that seems to understand evangelism as “opening our doors and not being openly hostile to people who come through them.” We have come to believe that “radical hospitality” means providing official greeters to shake hands and this is the end of our evangelistic responsibilities when it is, in fact, the beginning.

Paul, Timothy, Silas and Luke took hospitality to the next level. They went to where the people were. They did not content themselves with trite sayings about charity beginning at home. They took seriously the commandment of Jesus to take the good news into the whole world – even “to the ends of the earth.” They went to where the customs and the languages were different from their own. They traveled to places where they didn’t know a soul. They packed up the Gospel, put it into their suitcases, and set off to tell the whole world about Jesus.

THIRDLY, they came to understand that ***the Gospel is best transmitted through personal relationships.***

I don’t know if they knew this before they got to Philippi but, if they didn’t, they surely learned it there. Paul was, you remember, a great preacher and speaker. He could capture an audience with his personal charisma and woo them with his rhetoric. But those same things could also get him into trouble, and they often did.

What he came to understand in Philippi, was that while the Gospel could be transmitted through preaching, the church would be built on personal relationships.

He saw with brilliant insight that, when Lydia said, “Come and stay at my house,” he really had no choice -- not if the gospel was going to be more than a proposition, not if it was going to be more than a theological notion. No, if the Gospel was going to be real and have real impact on the life of this woman and those in her home and, maybe, all those in the city of Philippi, then he was going to have to step, once again, outside his comfort zone, outside the narrow confines of archaic Hebrew tradition and popular propriety and enter that gentile woman’s home and stay there.

Which brings us to number **FOUR** – Lydia herself.

What a marvelous woman she was. Though we have no way of knowing, scholars infer from the text and the historical context that she was probably a widow who had inherited a successful business from her deceased husband. She had taken it over and continued to succeed in it – no mean feat for a woman in the first century, even in enlightened Greece.

But for all her wealth and success, for all the creature comforts that her money bought for her, she was still seeking. Something was missing from her life.

She did not find it in the world of trade and commerce. She did not find it in her lavish and comfortable lifestyle. She did not find it in the pagan temples. She did not find it in the small community of Jewish women who met by the river but who excluded her from their inner circle.

But she did find it – she recognized it instantly – in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it was given to her by Paul.

Upon recognizing what was missing from her life she might have done several things: She might have intellectualized about it. That's fun. She might have talked and written and come up with theories and broken it down and analyzed and psychologized the whole thing.

She might have emoted. She might have made everyone form a circle and join hands and sing Kumbaya. She might have shared with other people how lonely and desperate she was, and they could have all had a good cry and gone home and had a glass of wine and felt better until the next time.

But she didn't do any of that. She simply invited Paul and his friends into her home and when Paul came in, so did Christ.

That was kinda dangerous, wasn't it? Inviting someone into her home? They might have been some kind of religious nuts. They might have been con artists. They might have been unstable in any number of ways. But she invited them into her home.

Thank goodness we are not expected to do that today -- invite people we don't know into our homes. No, what we are expected to do, commanded by our Lord to do, is invite people into our hearts. Into our lives. Into our church. Into our circle of intimacy – the one we draw around ourselves every day and decide whom we will let in and whom we will exclude.

We are called to step outside our comfort zones and welcome people into our church. We are called to Love Boldly, to Serve Joyously, to Lead Courageously. We are called to make "Open Hearts. Open Minds. Open Doors." More than a motto.

Lydia did that.

She invited them in and they came in and, in time, the Christian church at Philippi became the most successful and enduring church in all of Greece. It became, through Lydia's leadership, the church which financed most of Paul's missionary work in Europe.

Philippi became what could rightly be called the Mother Church of Europe. And Lydia was the mother of the Mother Church.

May God grant all of Christianity more such mothers as she.

AMEN