

Open Heart, Open Home
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Julie Emery
At The Larchmont Avenue Church
6th Sunday of Easter, Mothers Day, May 9, 2010

John 14:23-29

Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.

Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

"I stop writing the Poem," by Tess Gallagher

To fold the clothes. No matter who lives
or who dies, I'm still a woman.
I'll always have plenty to do.
I bring the arms of his shirt
together. Nothing can stop
our tenderness. I'll get back

to the poem. I'll get back to being
a woman. But for now
there's a shirt, a giant shirt
in my hands, and somewhere a small girl
standing next to her mother
watching to see how it's done.

On this day celebrating the prevailing faith of women we read about Lydia, the first convert to Christianity in Europe: a woman and the head of her household. Lydia is another of those women who seem to confound and confuse scholars – a woman unattached to a man and so strange. Perhaps she was a widow or divorced, they posit. She is a dealer in purple cloth, which may or may not make her wealthy but certainly means she worked with those of means, since only the wealthy were allowed to wear or could afford to wear the color purple. Since she is not mentioned to be with a man, the text makes us believe she is on her own. A worshipper of God, though a Gentile, she has joined a group of women on the Sabbath for prayer.

Paul's presence among these women is strange as well, since in his previous tours of evangelism he has begun his preaching in the synogogue. Perhaps it is because this hasn't always worked out that Paul and his companions are trying a different route. They have come to Macedonia because of a dream – searching for a man who called to them, "Come and help us!" And so Paul and Silas and their entourage travel to Macedonia, to Phillipi and are looking for the man in their vision. Instead they meet Lydia.

But it's not just Lydia's gender that makes her special. It's her openness. She is open to hear the word of Paul even as he is a stranger offering a faith that must have seemed foreign and bizarre. When she converts she has everyone in her home baptized – probably slaves and children as well, and is at least part of the reason Calvin argued we should baptize babies. Like the woman in the poem by Tess Gallagher, she is a living example; as soon as she is baptized, she is inviting others into the faith.

Lydia's sense of vision is of what God is doing – in her presence, in her life and home, and in the work and life of Paul and Silas. After her conversion, she invites these strangers into her home, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful, come and stay at my home." Later in this story of Paul and Silas, before they leave Phillipi, they stop again at the home of Lydia, now a burgeoning house-church. Not surprising that Luke writes about this dynamic woman, "And she prevailed upon us."

My own mother was one of those who is always inviting extra people to stay at our house for dinner. Did you have a mother like that? With two teenage boys in our house there was always an extra boy or two hanging around, and so an extra mouth or two to feed. Growing up everyone called her "Ma Hoek," since she seemed to be a mother to everyone we met. Friends whose parents were going through divorce found solace at our table and on our couch. Hairdressers or church members struggling to make ends meet would be showered with huge baskets of food on the holidays, and invitations to join our family gatherings were always constant.

There were, at points growing up, that I didn't so much appreciate having extra teenage boys at our table, given that I was the natural recipient of incessant teasing. There were times that I wondered if my mother's endless invitations and gifts meant that I had less: less of those goodies being sent away, less attention. And yet now as a parent myself I long for many, many Lydias in the lives of my boys. Men and women both, I long for people who open their homes to them and invite them in.

As a mother I am aware every day that parents cannot do it alone – that as the saying goes it takes a village to raise a child. I hope for every child I know to be welcomed in by women and men of all paths and stories, some parents and some not. I hope for them men and women who take them under their wings and feed them good food and good advice. I hope for them people who show them the love of God in all her fierce and creative whimsy. I hope for them people who show them not just what the church is but what the church can be – whether or not those people are members of any particular church.

I hope for them people with vision and openness like Lydia – living without fear of strangers, without fear of the world, with openness to the Spirit at work in our midst, and with openness to each other. It is a hope I have for them, and for each of us too.

Openness to strangers, though, seems to be a bit countercultural these days. If you don't see this as a parent you have perhaps experienced it as a stranger when your innocent "hello" to a child at the park is met with wary eyes and suspicion. Once I was in a store rumbling through my purse and I saw a young child standing there, watching me, so I offered her a piece of candy I happened to have. A smart girl, she refused, and I caught myself aghast. "I am the stranger my mother warned me about!" I thought.

We are wary of strangers, what they offer, what they represent. A few months back, in the *New York Sun*, a woman named Lenore Skenazy wrote an article titled, "Why I let my 9-year-old travel on the Subway alone." She wrote later

that she expected some backlash, but got significantly more than she bargained for as the people of New York wrote in to assert their opinions. There were some people who wrote back championing her courage and grit as a parent raising children in the world today. But the vast majority of parents called her crazy, and even negligent or abusive to let a small child travel unattended through what seemed to them the fires of hell – the New York City public transportation system.

Perhaps she is crazy and negligent. But perhaps not. Perhaps she is living out a certain amount of openness that is our call as parents, or even more important our call as Christians.

It is Easter season: Christ is Risen, He is risen indeed. And the question for each of us in this season of Easter is to ask ourselves, what do we do now? Now that Christ is risen, how then shall we live?

Jesus says all the time throughout the gospels just as he does in the passage from John's Gospel today, the words "Do not fear, do not be afraid." He says this even when he knows that he will soon die, and leave his disciples alone. He says this knowing the despair they will face, the grief, the pain. He tells them that the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, will be with them always. He tells them to be at peace.

It isn't easy to do. In a world where car bombs are left in Times Square and the market continues to drop and the world seems so unpredictable, the natural tendency is for us to live out of fear. Fear for our loved ones, fear for what will happen tomorrow, fear for the future. Not only mothers but all of us can easily slip into that space where anxiety rules the day: What if I forget something? What if I never accomplish what I set out to do? What if I don't make the cut? What if I get fired? What if something awful happens?

But the path of Christ is a path through fear into hope. It is not a hope that is naive or cheery in the face of pain and suffering. It is instead a hope that, as one scholar puts it, stares into the face of evil and despair and answers with the knowledge that God will win.

When the earthquake hit Haiti the devastation was colossal. Some of you saw some of the photos of Haiti in my father's slideshow a few weeks ago. The images are still startling. The world mused at how a country that had already been barely scraping by could weather such a disaster. How could they face this new, overwhelming destruction.

But then reports came back of the singing. Do you remember? As that first night fell in camps of thousands that had been set up around the city reporters could hear voices floating on the air in song: hymns of Salvation that they knew by heart. Reminders of the love of Christ that conquers even the worst evils, waves of hope prevailing in the darkness. They were singing, singing, singing. As the days moved on the world answered with an openness of heart and home. People shared what they had, people gave time and resources, gifts and skill. There was and is sorrow, yes. There was and is fear, yes. There was and is suffering, yes. But hope, love, prevails.

As Christians we believe, and that means that we trust that God loves us more than we could possibly imagine. As Christians we trust that God will guide and protect the people we love. As Christians we trust and do not fear. As Christians, we have hope. It is a hope that sings in the dark. It is a hope that opens our hearts to the great possibility of the Spirit at work among us. It is a hope that opens our homes to strangers knowing that God's vision is bigger than our sight. As Christians we have faith, and so we believe that in spite of it all, God wins, Hope conquers, Love prevails. May it be a hope that lives in each of us - this day and forever. Amen.