

Sermon title: “Outside In” © 2019 Ellen Clark Clémot

Scripture text: Acts 16:9-15

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*Theme:* In committing to follow Christ, we commit to a lifetime of welcoming the stranger, the outcast, the lonely, and the poor, and even one another.

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Gracious God, you guide us through life. You make the impossible happen. You bring us hope, fill us with joy, and grant us peace. Meet us where we gather. Welcome us in, invite us to come and stay – knowing that we are yours.

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock, and our Redeemer, Amen.*

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This morning’s sermon text tells the story of Lydia – a remarkable story in many ways, and a turning point in the missionary outreach efforts of Paul and his companions. It marks a day of welcoming the outsiders in. In every way imaginable, the Christian tradition became an all-inclusive one through the mission outreach we hear about in Acts. Take a look at the iconic image on your bulletin cover that provides a glimpse of Lydia portrayed as a saint. And, one day on the riverbank, that is exactly who she became.

Her story is a call story of sorts, the call to discipleship, the call to follow Christ, that happened to everyday people in the first century just as we are called to follow Christ today. Each one of us has a story of our own, a faith story, a God experience, or an accumulation of experiences powerful enough to bring us to worship every Sunday, to have us hungry for something more, for meaning, for deeper connection between our life stories and the world around us.

Some of us are called to help make those deeper connections with Christ happen. Paul was one of those people. He was called by God to stop persecuting Christians and was transformed, becoming a follower of Christ instead. And while following Christ, he led others. Christ’s Spirit sent him out into the world as a missionary.

Others of us are meant to receive that Good News, and spread the joy right where we are, to raise our family in the church, to help our neighbor close to home. Christ inspires us to discipleship in teaching, caring, feeding, encouraging, praying, serving, visiting, welcoming – all the roles of a Christian disciple. These moments of calling are evidence of the Spirit at work in our lives.

For apostles like Paul, the Spirit sent him traveling long distances to share Christ’s message of loving kindness and gracious mercy. In the story of Lydia, we hear how the Spirit of Jesus sends Paul a vision during the night: a man pleading to Paul and saying “Come to Macedonia and help us!”

At the time, Paul, and his colleague Silas had just been joined by young man named Timothy in the region of southwestern Turkey, with plans to travel east to Asia Minor. Macedonia is off to the west across the Aegean Sea. The scripture tells us the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from going further east. Paul understood this vision to be God’s call to them that they now must travel to Macedonia instead, in what is today northern Greece. It meant that they now would be turning left instead of right, heading west instead of east, traveling to Europe, instead of going to Asia.

Everything changed for them as they trusted in God and followed where they felt God leading them. They understood God’s call on their lives. God calls on all of us, eventually.

Whether it is reaching out in love and caring for someone close at home, or dedicating your time and energy to the common good of your community through service, or infrastructure building, or political leadership, or thoughtful stewardship, we all have a role in building up God’s Kingdom today. It’s for us to listen for the opportunity to serve Christ, to walk through the open door, saying “Yes, I’ll help. I’ll go. I’ll be a disciple.”

So, when you find your heart leading you west when your head says East, when you feel yourself being led out of your way to help someone else, or to do something for the good of all, it just might be God at work – with special plans that are meant just for you.

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We read how Paul and his friends quickly re-organized their travel plans to follow God’s call – to proclaim the good news to the people in the Southern European region of Macedonia. It was a complicated journey. They had to sail across the Aegean, spending a night on the Island of Samothrace, then continue on in the morning to the Roman-ruled, Macedonian mid-section of modern-day Greece. They went inland from there to the town of Philippi.

According to scholars, first century Philippi was a beautiful resort community, a high-end retirement paradise for former Roman generals and other favored ones, where the weather was good and people had money to spend. Luke says Paul and his friends stayed there for several days. But on the Sabbath day, they went to look for a place to worship God. That’s when they headed outside the city gates to the river, the edge of town where their unorthodox practice of worshipping Jesus the Christ could safely be done.

It was at the river where they find several women already gathered for worship and they sit among them. They see that these women are worshipping God. The women are “God-fearers,” a term given to Gentiles who worshipped the God of Israel, our Creator. So Paul, and Silas and Timothy sat down among them, and Paul began to teach about Jesus the Christ. He talks to them about the Good News of hope, love, and forgiveness of sins for those who put their trust in Jesus. He explained everything Christ commanded about loving God and neighbor, about the crucifixion and resurrection, about the gift of the Holy Spirit, about his work as a disciple of Christ.

That’s when they meet “a certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God.”<sup>1</sup> She had not yet heard of Jesus, but that morning, she listened to Paul eagerly.

Lydia, we learn, significantly, is from the city of Thyatira, and a dealer in purple cloth. There is a lot packed in that statement that we might miss, but it would have been clear to Paul and his friends. The clues would be more apparent if Lydia were a modern-day disciple described as being from South Africa and owning a gold and diamond jewelry business. Or if she had just moved to New York from Paris and was selling handbags and perfume and her name was Coco Chanel.

In just a sentence or two of scripture, for those who know the first century world, we learn that this woman is both a woman of faith, and a business woman in the luxury goods sector. She is a woman, of means, who cares, about God. That’s the whole point. At least, that’s God’s point. So hold onto that thought. I want to take us back here, but first a word about Thyatira and the purple cloth trade in the resort community of Philippi.

In the wine-dark sea that rolls along the coastline of northern Greece and western Turkey, lives a particular shellfish called a *Murex brandaris*, with a distinctive shell like a conch, from which ancient world merchants along the coast of Asia Minor, where Lydia’s hometown of Thyatira is located, had learned to extract a rare, purple dye. These shellfish lived in relatively

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16:14 (NRSV).

deep water and were caught in baited traps suspended from floats. The dye was then extracted from the glands of thousands of the crushed shellfish left to bake in the sun. The resulting liquid was used to dye cloth fibers in a color range from pink to violet. The most striking hue was called “Imperial Purple,” because of its beauty and rarity and because only Royalty could afford it.

Purple cloth was a luxury item in the ancient world because the price of purple dye was worth more than its weight in gold. 10,000 shellfish were required to produce one gram of dye. Ancient records from the year 300 CE, in the time of Emperor Diocletian, reveal that one pound of purple dye cost three pounds of gold, about \$20,000 in today’s prices.

Piecing together this economic information with Lydia’s hometown location of Thyatira, and her role as a dealer in the purple cloth business, we can conclude that this was an extraordinary business-woman who had cornered a niche market in the luxury goods trade. She is also the head of her household, unusual for a woman, and she was important enough to be mentioned by name. It was the tradition for any head of household, that once the head of the household decides to be baptized, the whole household is baptized as well. And that is what Lydia decided to do.

There is no mention of a husband here. This is Lydia’s household, her luxury goods dealership, and her worship-life. But take note: on her own, working hard, she seeks something more meaningful in life than the going-market price of purple dye, in-roads in new client development, and the rough and tumble world of deal-making. There’s got to be more to life, she’s thinking. And so, on this Sabbath day, Lydia goes outside the city gates to the riverbank to worship God, to find deeper meaning, a purpose in life that goes beyond making money, tracking down clients, and cutting deals. It is there, through the Spirit of Jesus and the Good News preached by Paul, that God opens her heart.

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Notice that it’s God who does the opening. God opens our hearts when we can’t do it ourselves. It’s the problem we all face with that powerful, healing emotion called love. First, before we can love anyone, we have to accept being loved by God. Only when we can make ourselves vulnerable and accept love, receive compassion, and acknowledge our need for it, only then can we turn around and love others in a generous and neighborly way.

Once God opened Lydia’s heart, she eagerly sought to be baptized right there at the riverside, and she immediately offered her welcoming hospitality to Paul, Silas and Timothy. “Come and stay at my home,” Lydia smiles. You can almost see her, and hear the happiness in her voice. With an open heart, she invites them in, these ones who were once strangers, are now her brothers in Christ. She insisted, Luke writes, until “she prevailed upon us.”<sup>2</sup>

It is with Lydia that the church in Philippi would be born, the first Christian community on the continent of Europe. The Philippians, under Lydia’s leadership, would become Paul’s favorite, most beloved congregation.

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There’s more to this story. There’s one more insight I want to leave with you in thinking about the bigger picture of discipleship and God’s call on our lives. It’s what I mentioned earlier as being “the point” to this story, God’s point, at least, or why Luke, the author of the book of Acts, included it in this adventure novel book of the Bible.

Paul and his missionary friends were sent out to spread the Good News of Jesus Christ to all the world. It took them a little while to understand the weight of what that meant. The

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 16:15b.

message of loving one’s neighbor was not a message of exclusive preference for the poor and ill and destitute, or narrowly offered only to the Jews with whom God had made an earlier covenant. The new covenant, made between Jesus and all the world, is to include all people in God’s warm welcome home.

God’s grace, the Christian tradition, the love of Jesus, is not for just a few – not just for men to be disciples and priests. Lydia was baptized and anointed to be one too. She became the first minister of the fledgling church of Philippi, as the leader of her house church.

The liberating love of God is not just for the poor and needy. It is also for the wealthy and well-heeled. All are welcome in the inclusive family of Christ - everyone with a beating heart. And the more firmly tight our hearts are closed, the greater the need for the Spirit to open it.

So, be on the lookout for the call of God on your life. For the love of Jesus looking for a way in. Allow your hearts to be opened. Receive the liberating Good News that your worth is far greater than the money you make – or don’t make for that matter. God loves you for who you are. No matter what happened to you in the past, and from wherever you have come, Christ welcomes you in – with open arms and neighbor love.

“Come and stay at my home,” Lydia said.

That’s church – where we all belong.

*Amen.*