
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

Inviting Strange Men Into Your House

A Sermon by

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Scripture: Acts 16:9-15

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Pastor Ted and I will be away next weekend as we travel to San Antonio, Texas, for our daughter Kaitlin's graduation from Trinity University. Last week I preached about time, chronos time and kairos time. Where does the time go? They are born, grown up, four years of college, until they move back in! Who knows what will happen for Kaitlin! I wait to be informed. Her dream is to go on to medical school in a year, to get some life experience this year; we are open to all offers at this point.

All kidding aside, Kaitlin comes to mind because of this very scripture shared today, the story of Lydia. Back in 2003, Ted and I were on sabbatical, and we were able to go on a Steps of Paul tour to Greece and Turkey. Kaitlin was 14 at the time and she went with us. We went from Athens, Greece, to Corinth, onto a cruise ship to Greek isles and then east to Turkey. I think I have said this before, that we were there when the United States was staging in Turkey in order to invade Iraq, so our itinerary in Turkey was altered and we only visited a port city and Ephesus and headed back out to sea.

We were not quite following Paul's journey as described in Acts 16 today. Paul was further north in Turkey and boarded a smaller ship and set sail for Samothrace, one of the most rugged of the Greek islands, with no natural harbor today and its land too mountainous for cultivation. Samothrace does have, however, a mile high mountain in Mt. Moon, which was the home of the sanctuary of the Great Gods. Perhaps Paul and his captain used Mt. Moon as their directional sighting, a straight course to Samothrace and turn left to New City. New City is the strategic port on the east-west route through Greece. Walk inland 9-13 miles, over the mountain ridge, and you are in beautiful downtown Philippi. The ancient name was Crenides, or 'little fountains', but the father of Alexander the Great, Phillip II, named it after himself. It was partially marshland from all those fountains, but in the surrounding mountains, GOLD. Sleepy 'Little Fountains' became a strategic, fortified, no longer Greek, but Roman colony, wealthy, so much so that Philip established a mint there.¹ Philippi was 'on the map', on the Via Egnatia, the Roman road that could march troops in and keep threats out.

What vision did Paul have that sent him there to Philippi? Paul, a Roman citizen, would have known of Philippi because of the drama of the assassination of Julius Caesar 100 years earlier in the Battle of Philippi. Paul, once a Jew, now a believer in Jesus, always sought out the Jewish people whenever he went into a new city. His desire for the Jewish people was that they might come to faith in the Lord Jesus as their Messiah. So on Shabbat, Paul and Timothy and Silas found a group of women praying by the riverside, 'where prayer was customarily made'.

We prayed there too. Well, maybe not in the exact same spot, but alongside a stream where perhaps a synagogue once stood, where today is the Baptistry of Lydia Chapel/Church², where pilgrims like us, and Kaitlin, sat and read this text and scooped water out of the stream and reaffirmed our baptisms. We remember Kaitlin being especially moved by the story then, 14, not long after her confirmation, where the once 'just words about faith' became, just maybe, 'an apocalypse', an unveiling, 'thin place'. Was it a moment when the 'God who is still speaking' spoke to her? When have you had that still speaking moment?

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_V_of_Macedon

² <http://saintlydia.blogspot.com/>

Paul and his companions had sailed from Turkey to Greece, and there they met a woman named Lydia, from Thyatira, Turkey, a worshipper of God, the gods of her village being a horseman with a battle-ax and a goddess of lesser importance. Lydia was a member of the guild of dyers, and while I always heard the purple dye came from shellfish, Thyatira is inland and so it might have been from the plant madder-root, whose red-black berries were used to dye cloth. (You can also boil the plant in wine, add sugar or honey, and drink it to treat your jaundice, spleen, melancholy, palsy, hemorrhoids, and/or sciatica.³) What better place to be a seller of expensive purple cloths than in a city with a gold mine and a mint, with a Roman legion that has to display a band of purple cloth on its togas, and has Greek gods, Roman gods, pagan gods, diversity in religious views we call it today.

Lydia listened to Paul, and her heart was opened to this new God, and she and her household were baptized in the stream, and she insisted, she prevailed upon them, she 'had a surge of hospitality' that made her invite strange men into her house, where they stayed for several days.

So what, Nancy? Great story, but have you heard about Greece today, a nation bankrupt, in debt up over their ears, rioting, immigration problems, look what they did to our economy! How is God still speaking now?

Well, we are still in the season of Easter and we still continue to ask, "What do we do now that Jesus is risen?" Something significant, we hope, in response to such a transformative death.⁴

We haven't forgotten about Easter, have we? The banners are still up. They do not change until Pentecost when the winds of the Holy Spirit blow through and unite people of all languages and backgrounds and nationalities into a oneness. We have Doctors without Borders. In Nicaragua we met Architects without Borders. How is it that we, the church, could be about building a world, a people, our children, without borders? People are people, each with hopes and dreams, each with their unique humanity.

Lydia and her women praying by the stream was probably the first multicultural, multiracial church: Turkey, Greece, Israel, Palestine, Rome: once strangers, now a people of prayer together. Think of the strangers of our mobile society today who have a vision for a place where they are welcome and they find Church of the Beatitudes and come in our doors, Saturday night at 5, Sunday at 9, 10:30 or now 11, and they wonder, they say no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here, but do they mean it? Do they not only hear it through our words, but do they feel it through our actions? The text says, Lydia said with a surge of hospitality, "You strange men, Paul and Silas, and Timothy, come to my house. Stay. Teach us more. Tell us more. We, too, want to know this Jesus."

It does not take 3,000 people to be a church. To be a church it takes a small group of strangers, willing to hear, and a surge of hospitality. Lydia was open and eager when visitors arrived at her place of prayer. Within a very short time, there was no distinction, no insiders, no outsiders, but a praying people, together.

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rubia>

⁴ Feasting on the Word, p. 475

We know people like 'Lydia'. We need more 'Lydias'.

As a point of professional courtesy, please allow me to share with you two 'Lydias', both who have recently died. One was Eleanor Hofmann, whose life we celebrated yesterday, a woman who joined this church in 1959, who gave generously of her time and her talents. One of her proudest moments was when this Church voted to become intentionally Open and Affirming, welcoming of all people, and Eleanor was one who said it like it was: she had little understanding of people who could not welcome ALL the people.

Another person who was a 'Lydia' to me was Fran Godwin, beloved member of this congregation since 1961. Fran died this past week and her celebration of life service will be at the Beatitudes Campus Tuesday at 2 pm. Fran did so many things in the life of this congregation. She was a member of the staff for 25 years. She taught confirmation. She taught me the words boboshea, that white plastic or paper thing that goes around Christmas Eve candles, and antependia, the colors in the church that get changed according to seasons. Fran was in charge of those. She would let me know when it was time. She would come in in December and start talking about getting ready for Easter. Can we get through Christmas first? She would walk into my office every Wednesday morning, say hello, tell what was what, give me my hug and kiss and you're doing a great job. Fran would welcome the strangers, walk up to anyone and greet them, make them feel at home, learn their name, care for the other. We will miss her. I am not sure the antependia will get changed. Sure, it will, because a new Lydia will be born, someone who has the vision, hears the call, who believes they are called to be a surge of hospitality, one who will cross over and become a partner in ministry.

On this day which celebrates mothers and families and persons who nurture families, may we also be and become Lydias.

Amen.