

May 8, 2022  
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The Beauty of the Church—Baptism  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Acts 16:9–15 (New Revised Standard Version)

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 love this book. It is called *Amazing Grace* and it’s about a girl named Grace. Grace loved stories - in books, in movies, and those told by her grandmother. Most of all she loved acting them out. She was Anansi the spider and Joan of Arc; she sailed the seven seas as a pirate and was a hero in the Trojan War. Then Grace’s teacher announced that her class would be performing *Peter Pan*, and Grace knew right away that she wanted to play Peter. Then, a boy in her class tells Grace she can’t be Peter Pan because she’s a girl, and Peter Pan is a boy. Next, a girl in her class tells Grace she can’t be Peter Pan because Grace is black, and Peter Pan is white. Grace goes home that day sad and self-conscious, but her mother and grandmother encourage her to ignore the kids telling her what she can’t do. They assure her, “Those kids don’t know anything.”

Grace practices all weekend and when the time comes to audition, the whole class agrees that Grace is the best and should be Peter Pan. So she was. The play was a huge success, and Grace was amazing. *Amazing Grace*. Grace’s classmates thought they knew what Peter Pan looked like. They thought they knew that Peter Pan was white and male and because that’s what they expected, they can’t imagine a world where Peter Pan looked differently. But Peter Pan looks like Grace, because Peter Pan is Grace, even if her classmates had to see it to believe it.

I thought of that wonderful children’s book this week when reading this story of Lydia because women have been a part of leading the church since it began. I remember when I went to seminary, I noticed that many of my fellow aspiring preachers looked like what I thought preachers looked like. They had big bellies and they were men. I was fresh out of college and I didn’t have a big belly, and I wasn’t a man. When you read the stories of Jesus, there are so many women. Mary, the mother of Jesus, the women disciples—Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Martha and others. Women were the first to encounter the risen Christ and share the good news of Easter. And today we hear the story of Lydia.

Lydia is a woman from Thyatira of Macedonia who sells purple cloth and worships God. Paul and his group encounter Lydia on the sabbath day, outside the gate by the river where women gathered to pray. The women gathered to pray outside the safety of the city gate -- I wonder if they wanted to get away from messages of how they were supposed to live their lives? Maybe Lydia was there to escape others who judged her for running her own business? At the river she could gather with other women to be real, to vent, to talk about why they had to fight so hard to just exist and wonder why they couldn’t be trusted with their own bodies and decisions. Together they could search for something larger than the world in which they found themselves.

Our hearts don’t open all by themselves. When we are struggling on our own and thinking we have to dig ourselves out of a pit alone, it doesn’t work. As Christians, we practice our faith

in community. We have each other's backs, we listen to each other's stories, and hear how the Holy Spirit is calling us.

The Holy Spirit reached out to Lydia, comforted her, and affirmed her. I wonder if Paul shared stories about Jesus' encounters with women - Jesus encouraging Martha to get out of the kitchen and come and share stories with the rest of them. Or the story of the Syrophenician woman standing up to Jesus, who had just called her a dog, and Jesus realizing his mistake and healing her daughter afterwards. Stories of Jesus turning over tables in his anger that the temple was used as a marketplace instead of as a house of prayer. Stories of persistence. Stories of Jesus who loved the people so much that he died as an agitator on the cross because he knew that the ways of empire and power were not what God wanted for God's creation.

In that place, Lydia opens her heart to all that Paul has to say and is baptized along with her whole household. I wonder if Lydia saw a kinship with Jesus who was drawn to those who were suffering. Lydia heard about God who loves her, and she convinced her whole household, her chosen family, to be part of this life with Jesus.

The beauty of the church is we are reminded in baptism that we are loved and claimed by God for being just who we are *because of who God is*. We baptize because of God's faithfulness, not our own. Baptism reminds us who and whose we are. Lydia opens her home to Paul and those with him, and her home becomes the base for a new church in Macedonia and beyond. She and her household keep that new church going. Today Lydia is known as the first European convert.

Lydia wasn't who Paul expected or who he imagined. Before meeting Lydia, Paul had a dream and it was a man from Macedonia who called out to him and begged him to come and help them. Paul takes his dream seriously and as soon as he is able he sets out for Macedonia to find this man and offer help in the name of Christ.

I wonder what might have happened if Paul had only been willing to see that man from his vision. What if he had not been open to another encounter or discounted Lydia because she was a woman? Lydia is also unexpected because she was an independent woman. She was a businesswoman who had charge of an entire household of her own. She wasn't Jewish and yet she worshipped the God of the Jews. There is a high probability that she was a woman of color. Paul knew that women were a crucial part of Jesus' ministry, and when he meets an independent Macedonian businesswoman of color, he talks to her and God opens Lydia's heart to hear Paul's words.

We are in the fifty great days of Easter and we are talking about the beauty of the church. We want you to learn some Greek, so the word on the front of your bulletin says *ekklesia* which is translated as church. We come together once a week on our holy day to worship God and to support one another as we live as followers of Christ. In 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. described 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning as one of the most segregated hours in Christian America. We live in a world that is more diverse and more connected than ever, but we are still plagued by barriers of distrust and discrimination in our churches.

Lydia's story reminds us of a different view where God's church is bigger and more inclusive than we expect. Lydia served and spoke to a world that did not fully see her, and her story is a promise that the Holy Spirit is alive and at work all over this world because the Holy Spirit is not contained by limits that we try and impose. Lydia wasn't what was expected, she was an independent, faithful woman of color who made her house into a church for so many others. It took someone like Lydia to show us what can be is not the limit of what should be.

Today is Mother's Day. In May 1907 Anna Jarvis passed out 500 white carnations at her Methodist church in Grafton, West Virginia. She wanted to commemorate the life of her mother. Her mother, Anna Reeves Jarvis, had organized poor women in Virginia into Mothers' Work Day Clubs to raise the issue of clean water and sanitation in relation to the lives of women and children. She worked for universal access to medicine for the poor. She also worked on both sides of the Civil War working for camp sanitation and medical care for soldiers of the North and the South. One year later, Anna Jarvis' church created a special service to honor mothers.

The YMCA and the World Sunday School Association lobbied Congress to make Mother's Day a national holiday, and in 1914, Mother's Day became a holiday in America. For many years, radical Protestant women had been working for a national Mother's Day hoping that it would further issues related to women's lives. They wanted women to have agency over their own lives. In 1870 Julia Ward Howe, famous for writing the "Battle Hymn of the Republic", wrote "A Mother's Day Proclamation" calling women to pacifism and political resistance.<sup>1</sup>

A lot has happened this week and it has made me feel helpless and sad. I listened to a podcast where Barbara Brown Taylor talked about how grief helps peel the fat, the fluff of our faith away, to reveal the "saved seed of an old divine wildness" in us.<sup>2</sup> How can we use that divine wildness in us to make a difference just like those radical Protestant women?

The Christian faith is about the unexpected and unimaginable. God meets us as a tiny child. God in Jesus preaches a world of justice beyond any that has been known where we care for the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. A world where we do the next right thing and are about the common good of others. God in Jesus shows us that even in death we are never alone. God in Jesus overcomes death, returns to new life and offers new life to us. In baptism Lydia and her family experience the incredible promise that there is no limit to God's goodness or love.

It is in this promise that we place our faith. It is to this promise that we cling on the days that we fear injustice and prejudice might have the last word. When we can only picture a world that is broken, may we trust in God to open our hearts so that we can see what God sees. Amazing grace. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/radical-history-of-mothers-day\\_b\\_3259326](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/radical-history-of-mothers-day_b_3259326)

<sup>2</sup> <https://evolvingfaith.com/podcast/season-2/episode-1>