

**Heroes of the Faith – 3. Lydia**  
**Acts 16:13—15, 40**  
**August 6, 2023**  
**Pastor Tami Luckhardt**

Can you recall a time when you were the recipient of radical hospitality? Maybe there was that time someone overheard you talking about something you wanted or needed, and they gifted it to you. Perhaps you've received an encouraging note or unexpected flowers from a friend. Or that time you went somewhere, and you felt like your host really put some thought and effort into what you might want or need while you were there as their guest. Over the course of the last few weeks, Jerry and I have been the recipients of radical hospitality as we traveled with our family to Michigan to celebrate and remember the life of his mother, Evelyn Luckhardt. Your prayers, many cards and emails, the neighbors who watched our dog and watered our plants, Jerry's family's home church and the hospitality they extended to our family, the hosts who welcomed us into their homes, and colleagues like Pastor Bethany who officiated a celebration of life service here at Messiah Church and preached in my absence last Sunday. These are all gifts of hospitality and grace given to me so that I could be with my family. Acts of radical hospitality help us feel seen and known and loved.

Today we are week three of our message series *Heroes of Our Faith* where we are spending time learning about some of the heroes from the Bible, people whose courage, strength, and resilience we can look up to as models for our own lives. Today, we'll hear the story of Lydia and her readiness to listen to God's voice in her life and then act on it can still inspire us today.

We find Lydia's story in the New Testament book of the Acts of the Apostles. Lydia is identified immediately as a foreigner but one who had enough money and power to keep her safe and perhaps even comfortable. She came from the northwest Turkish town of Thyatira, known today as modern-day Turkey, and known then as an artist colony, perhaps much like Santa Fe, New Mexico is known to us today. We also know she had enough community around her to travel the dangerous trade routes, most of which were likely at sea.

Lydia was known as a purveyor/vendor/trader of purple cloth. In those days, purple dye was extracted from shellfish found in the ocean, making that cloth extremely expensive. While Lydia was a member of the artist guild that came from her hometown, we don't know how it came to be that a woman, most likely a single mom with many children who was either divorced or widowed, became a professional business person. But when we first meet her, she has crossed into northeastern Greece and established her business in the Roman city of Philippi. As a dealer in purple cloth, Lydia had access to powerful and prestigious people. She herself was most likely wealthy but not necessarily of high social status.

To get the full picture of what is going on here, let's back up just a little bit and begin reading at the beginning of chapter 16. The apostle Paul was going about doing God's will. He wasn't sitting passively waiting for God to guide him supernaturally but moved from town to town as he had planned. Until this time, Paul's work had been limited to Asia Minor but now God, for reasons we do not know, was blocking him from the places he had planned to go. Instead, Paul had dream of a man calling him to Macedonia to help him. Paul was convinced that this was God calling them to go. So, Paul and Silas and their traveling companions set out to preach the good news of Jesus to the people of Macedonia.

And on their way, they stopped in the city of Philippi, described as a *leading city in the Roman colony*. And while there, on the Sabbath, a Saturday, they were looking for a place to pray. So,

they went outside the city gate and down to the river where they found a group of women gathered. It was there that they met Lydia. She was also there praying, perhaps seeking a better life for herself and her family.

Perhaps she had heard word from the east of this Invisible God who was so different from the temples and shrines and idols that represented the many, many gods of the Roman culture. This God who wanted people to treat one another well. This God who longed for a better life for their creation. Lydia was described as a *Gentile God worshiper*. So even before she met Paul and Silas, we see that God was at work in her life. This is known as prevenient grace, God's grace at work in our lives even before we are aware of it. It was here that Paul and Silas shared the ways and means to connect with this living God, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of life. Those things included breaking of bread (like we will do here in just a few minutes), sharing resources, caring for one another's health and well-being, re-distributing the wealth and standing up to the oppressive Roman empire.

We read on that *the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly and embrace what Paul was saying so that Lydia and her entire household were baptized*. Once baptized, she invited them to stay in her house, a place where Paul and his traveling companions remained for several weeks. Her opened heart resulted in open doors. In their time together, Paul instructed Lydia on what she needed to know as a new follower of Jesus. And it was right there, in her house, that she began the first church in Europe where she welcomed other new believers into a Christian community of fellowship and faith. In converting to Christianity, Lydia was taking a heroic leap of faith because by doing so she was jeopardizing everything she had. She risked losing her wealth, her business, her livelihood and even her life.

Now, there is a lot that is left to our imaginations in this passage. What were they talking about? Who were these other women who were with her at the river and why had they gathered there? What happened to them after this story ended? We just don't know. But what we do know is that Lydia's open-heart led to open doors and extending radical hospitality to Paul and Silas and their traveling companions. Once again, we see that God uses the most unlikely of people to achieve God's purposes. And as Lydia shared her hospitality, her home became this hub where siblings in Christ found encouragement and belonging. As Christians, we are called to radical hospitality.

I mentioned earlier that Lydia was from Thyatira, that was her hometown but here in this story, we find her living in Philippi, away from the place that she once called home. Perhaps this made her particularly aware and empathetic to the needs and feeling of the travelers. And as a successful businesswoman, she was both able and willing to support the ministry of Jesus Christ by providing shelter to those who were preaching the gospel. And so, we see her welcoming strangers in a place where she was once a stranger herself. While she is seen throughout history as a woman of means and generosity, I can't help but wonder if that openness was in response to something from her past, something she had spent her entire life trying to overcome, perhaps it was being a stranger in a strange land. Have you ever found yourself in that situation, where you moved to a new place or started a new job or a new school and you knew no one, and someone took that first step and reached out to welcome you? Have you been able to pay that act of kindness forward in some way? Messiah Church has the reputation of being a warm, welcoming community. We hear it over and over again in our Discover Messiah classes, how many folks instantly felt welcome here. You did that. The conference office recognizes that it is a part of our DNA. That's why they continually reach out to us to host conference-wide events. (I think we have the fourth such event this year on our calendar for the fall.) You do that and it is a direct result of your radical hospitality.

My dream for Messiah Church (and I know many of yours) is that this will be a place where you not only feel welcome here, but also seen, known, and loved, just the way you are. Our Statement of Inclusion is meant to be more specific about how you will be welcomed here as we continue to live into being a fully

inclusive faith community. While we still have work to do, I want you to know that I am so proud of the way you are already living into this.

As we near the end of this story, we read that while they were still in Philippi, Paul and Silas went back to the place of prayer and were followed and harassed by an enslaved woman who was possessed by a spirit that allowed her to foresee the future. Paul became so annoyed by her shouting that he ended up performing an exorcism right there on the spot. When her owners realized their opportunity to make money off her was gone, they dragged Paul and Silas to the magistrate. They were found guilty of disturbing the peace, stripped naked, severely beaten with a rod, and thrown into prison. Next, we read of an earthquake, an act of God, that shook loose their chains and the prison doors allowing Paul and Silas to go free. And it was their jailer who took them to his home where he cared for their wounds, fed them, and gave them a place to heal and rest. And while there, the jailer and his family's hearts were also opened to the message of Jesus Christ, and they are all baptized. The next morning, the magistrate sent word that they were free to go in peace.

It is not likely that the news of their beating and imprisonment had spread. They didn't have social media, texting or even phones for that matter, that allowed news to travel around the world in a matter of seconds like it does today. So as Paul returned to Lydia's home, she most likely had not heard about the news of the jail break and she quickly welcomed them back into her home, no questions asked, where they once again encouraged their siblings in Christ and then departed from Philippi for the last time. Lydia is someone who embodies what it looks like to support ministry so that it can grow and survive. She was blessed with access to financial and social resources, and she used them to establish the first church of Jesus in her community. What gifts are you blessed with that you can use to help build up this faith community?

Generosity and hospitality were key in the early church. Paul's style of leadership was to empower local folks to lead this new way of being in the world, loving God and loving others and recognizing the dignity of each person. We can see through this story that from the beginning, women have been called to preach the gospel. In fact, God calls all of us to do that regardless of our gender, race, age, wealth, or our social status. Clearly the growth of the church and the sharing of the gospel is a team effort. An effort that requires the extension of hospitality and generosity. It's important to remember that it may be found in unexpected places and coming from those whom we may not anticipate will extend it.

As we read the Acts of the Apostles and place ourselves within the stories, we realize that we too are all called to be apostles/followers of the one who invites us to this table the table of grace over and over again, to find community, forgiveness and belonging.

So, my question for you today is... what radical act of hospitality is God calling you to this day, in this unique and challenging time in which we live and move in this world? Are you able and willing, like Lydia, to listen eagerly so that your heart can be cracked opened by God and then have the courage to act on it? Perhaps you feel you're being called to be like that first guy in our video and start a new team to welcome and support our next refugee family to our community.

Maybe it's to start a conversation around how we can be more earth friendly in our ministries at Messiah Church. Perhaps you feel you're

being called to join a movement and serve on our Inclusion Team or serve on a mission team to Kenya, South Dakota or New Prague. Maybe it's to invest in the life of a youth or a child as a small group leader or Kid Street teacher this fall. What radical act of hospitality is God calling you to this day?

Let's pray. Loving God, thank you for using Lydia's business acumen, her open heart and spiritual passion to build the church. I pray that you would do the same for us. Help us to listen eagerly so that our hearts will be opened to your word, that we can serve and love you well by extending hospitality and generosity to one another. Amen.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 6, 2023**

#### **Weekly Prayer**

God of new beginnings, as you meet me where I am today, I give thanks that you are not content to leave me here. Thank you for your grace that has drawn me to this time today where I can wrestle with your Word and grow in faith. Amen.

#### **Monday, August 7**

##### **Scripture: Acts 16:1-12**

Paul reached Derbe, and then Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy. He was the son of a believing Jewish woman and a Greek father. The brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take Timothy with him, so he circumcised him. This was because of the Jews who lived in those areas, for they all knew Timothy's father was Greek. As Paul and his companions traveled through the cities, they instructed Gentile believers to keep the regulations put in place by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and every day their numbers flourished.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead. A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"<sup>1</sup> Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We sailed from Troas straight for Samothrace and came to Neapolis the following day.<sup>12</sup> From there we went to Philippi, a city of Macedonia's first district and a Roman colony. We stayed in that city several days.

##### **Observation**

This story shows us how the apostle Paul went about doing God's will. He didn't sit passively waiting for God to guide him supernaturally but moved from town to town as he had planned. He always "stayed tuned," however. God guided him in a special way to new territory for the Christian mission: the Aegean peninsula and the populous cities of Greece.

##### **Application**

Until this time, Paul's work had been limited to Asia Minor. Now God blocked him from two places he planned to go (the text does not say how) and sent a dream of a man calling Paul to preach in Macedonia where he meets this week's hero of our faith, Lydia. How can you stay

alert for the unusual times when God guides you directly? Have you ever had such an experience?

### **Prayer**

Lord, I offer my life to you. Help me to walk in your way. Make me the person you want me to be so that others can come to know your grace, power, and love. Amen.

## **Tuesday, August 8**

### **Scripture: Acts 16:13-15, 40**

On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the riverbank, where we thought there might be a place for prayer. We sat down and began to talk with the women who had gathered. One of those women was Lydia, a Gentile God-worshipper from the city of Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened, the Lord enabled her to embrace Paul's message. Once she and her household were baptized, she urged, "Now that you have decided that I am a believer in the Lord, come and stay in my house." And she persuaded us.

Paul and Silas left the prison and made their way to Lydia's house where they encouraged the brothers and sisters. Then they left Philippi.

### **Observation**

As a dealer in purple cloth, Lydia had access to powerful and prestigious people. She herself was most likely wealthy but not necessarily of high social status. As Paul and Silas spoke, the Lord opened Lydia's heart and she listened eagerly to what they said. Then she and her household were baptized. In doing this, she took a heroic leap of faith that jeopardized all her worldly riches by starting the first Christian church on Greek soil.

### **Application**

Lydia was blessed with access to financial and social resources but instead of using them for herself, she used them to establish a house church, a center of Christian worship and outreach in Philippi; Lydia was the leader. What gifts are you blessed with that can help build up the community /kin(g)dom of God?

### **Prayer**

God, help me to open my heart and listen eagerly to your voice in my life and then give me the wisdom to recognize my gifts and put them to use to build up your kin(g)dom. Amen.

## **Wednesday, August 9**

### **Scripture: Acts 16:25-40**

Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. All at once there was such a violent earthquake that it shook the prison's foundations. The doors flew open and everyone's chains came loose. When the jailer awoke and saw the open doors of the prison, he thought the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul shouted loudly, "Don't harm yourself! We're all here!" The jailer called for some lights, rushed in, and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He led them outside and asked, "Honorable masters, what must I do to be rescued?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your entire household." They spoke the Lord's word to him and everyone else in his house. Right then, in the middle of the night, the jailer welcomed them and washed their wounds. He and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his home and gave them a

meal. He was overjoyed because he and everyone in his household had come to believe in God. The next morning the legal authorities sent the police to the jailer with the order "Release those people." So the jailer reported this to Paul, informing him, "The authorities sent word that you both are to be released. You can leave now. Go in peace." Paul told the police, "Even though we are Roman citizens, they beat us publicly without first finding us guilty of a crime, and they threw us into prison. And now they want to send us away secretly? No way! They themselves will have to come and escort us out." The police reported this to the legal authorities, who were alarmed to learn that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. They came and consoled Paul and Silas, escorting them out of prison and begging them to leave the city. Paul and Silas left the prison and made their way to Lydia's house where they encouraged the brothers and sisters. Then they left Philippi.

### **Observation**

Earthquakes were not common in this region. This narrative implies that instead of an area-wide natural disaster, God heard the hymns and prayers of Paul and Silas and used this quake (this act of God) to open the prison door and loosen their chains.

### **Application**

Can you recall a time in your life when you felt like there was no way out of a dire or heartbreaking situation but somehow God made a way forward? Perhaps hindsight and reflection can help you see how God was with you through tough times and helped to lead you through.

### **Prayer**

God, sometimes I need you to shake things up in my life so I can let go of the things that are holding me down, freeing me up to move forward with you. Amen.

## **Thursday, August 10**

### **Scripture: Philippians 1:1-11**

From Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus. To all those in Philippi who are God's people in Christ Jesus, along with your supervisors and servants. May the grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I'm thankful for all of you every time I pray, and it's always a prayer full of joy. I'm glad because of the way you have been my partners in the ministry of the gospel from the time you first believed it until now. I'm sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus. I have good reason to think this way about all of you because I keep you in my heart. You are all my partners in God's grace, both during my time in prison and in the defense and support of the gospel. God is my witness that I feel affection for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. This is my prayer: that your love might become even more and more rich with knowledge and all kinds of insight. I pray this so that you will be able to decide what really matters and so you will be sincere and blameless on the day of Christ. I pray that you will then be filled with the fruit of righteousness, which comes from Jesus Christ, in order to give glory and praise to God.

### **Observation**

In this passage, we see that Paul's experience of Christ shapes his perspective on life. He knows that God's grace is available to him in the midst of difficulty. Christ suffered without mercy or help, so Paul might have the grace of God. Paul has come to love the people of Philippi so much that he's willing to suffer for their good.

### **Application**

How has your experience with Christ helped to shape your perspective on life? Are you able to follow Paul's example in how you relate to those in your life?

### **Prayer**

Gracious God, today I reflect and give thanks for my partners in ministry and in life. Amen.

### **Friday, August 11**

#### **Scripture: Philippians 1:12-30**

Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the things that have happened to me have actually advanced the gospel. The whole Praetorian Guard and everyone else knows that I'm in prison for Christ. Most of the brothers and sisters have had more confidence through the Lord to speak the word boldly and bravely because of my jail time. Some certainly preach Christ with jealous and competitive motives, but others preach with good motives. They are motivated by love, because they know that I'm put here to give a defense of the gospel; the others preach Christ because of their selfish ambition. They are insincere, hoping to cause me more pain while I'm in prison. What do I think about this? Just this: since Christ is proclaimed in every possible way, whether from dishonest or true motives, I'm glad and I'll continue to be glad. I'm glad because I know that this will result in my release through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. It is my expectation and hope that I won't be put to shame in anything. Rather, I hope with daring courage that Christ's greatness will be seen in my body, now as always, whether I live or die. Because for me, living serves Christ and dying is even better. If I continue to live in this world, I get results from my work. But I don't know what I prefer. I'm torn between the two because I want to leave this life and be with Christ, which is far better. However, it's more important for me to stay in this world for your sake. I'm sure of this: I will stay alive and remain with all of you to help your progress and the joy of your faith, and to increase your pride in Christ Jesus through my presence when I visit you again.

Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel. That way, you won't be afraid of anything your enemies do. Your faithfulness and courage are a sign of their coming destruction and your salvation, which is from God. God has generously granted you the privilege, not only of believing in Christ but also of suffering for Christ's sake. You are having the same struggle that you saw me face and now hear that I'm still facing.

### **Observation**

Although Paul's imprisonment may have seemed like the end of his ministry opportunities, God actually used it to further the gospel. Not only was he able to reach Roman guards, but his incarceration also inspired others to preach boldly, whether from good motives or bad.

### **Application**

Do you ever look at your circumstances and see no possible way the Lord can bring something good from them? What benefit could come from illness, unemployment, a broken family, or other difficulties? While we can't always understand what God is doing, we can always trust God to bring something good out of our situations. I know that I can look back on times in my life that at the time seemed hopeless, but now I can see how God was able to use that situation and wring something good out of it. How about you?

### **Prayer**

God, I trust that you are with me even when I cannot see or hear you. In those times, give me the ability to put my trust in your faithfulness and goodness. Amen.

### **Saturday, August 12**

#### **Scripture: Philippians 2:1-11**

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for what is better for others. Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus:

Though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit.

But he emptied himself  
by taking the form of a slave  
and by becoming like human beings.

When he found himself in the form of a human,  
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross.

Therefore, God highly honored him  
and gave him a name above all names,  
so that at the name of Jesus everyone  
in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow  
and every tongue confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

#### **Observation**

Paul's experience of the blessings given through Christ grows when he sees the church following Christ's example by working for others rather than working for themselves. So what is the right model for our relationships with one another? According to Paul, the key is to "have the same mindset as Christ Jesus."

#### **Application**

Christians are not to be without passion for the cause of Christ, but "ambition" for the things of God is quite different from "selfish ambition." In what way is it different? The person passionate for the gospel actually values others above themselves. They think of others as better than they are, more important. And their goal is not to look "to your own interests," but instead to look "to the interests of others."

#### **Prayer**

Almighty God, I praise you for your great faithfulness and for your great plan for my life. May I have a Christ-like mindset so that I do nothing out of selfish ambition, but value others above myself. Amen.