

A Woman's Place

Acts 16:9-15

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian
Church of Portland, Indiana on Mother's Day, May 8, 2016]

I

In a letter to her husband John Adams, Abigail Adams wrote:

“In the new code of laws which you make, I desire that you would remember the ladies, and be more favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of their husbands.”

Then she quoted a line of poetry from Daniel Defoe:

Remember all men would be tyrants if they could.

Remember the ladies!

On this Mother's Day I would like us to remember Lydia—

an unmarried woman,

a businesswoman,

a dealer in purple cloth,

and a woman who opened her heart to the Gospel

and her home to Paul and his companions.

Today, on Mother's day, let us consider Lydia and a woman's place.

II

First, consider Lydia's place at a shop in the affluent marketplace of Philippi.

Lydia was from Thyatira, a city of Asia Minor (Turkey) famous for its textile industry.

Lydia made her way in that industry to become a dealer in purple linen, the Gucci handbag of Roman times.

In the ancient world purple stood for the two things that mattered most—money and power.

It was the fabric most coveted by royalty and by people of means.

Purple appears numerous times in the Bible.

In Exodus, the garments of the priesthood and the curtains separating the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle were sowed of blue, purple, and scarlet thread. (26:1)

In Proverbs 31, the portrait of the ideal wife says, “her clothing is fine linen and purple.” (Prov. 31:22)

In Luke 16, Jesus told a parable of a man who “was clothed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day.” (16:19)

Mark 15 says that when Jesus had been condemned to death, the soldiers mocked him by putting a purple robe on him and a crown of thorns on his head. (15:17)

Could it be that purple is God’s favorite color?

Lydia shows us that purple is no ordinary color.

Lydia was an entrepreneur and a successful businesswoman.

It takes a bold and sassy woman to succeed in a world where the odds are stacked against her.

One of television's sassiest female characters was Julia Sugarbaker from *Designing Women*. Do any of you remember her?

There was one particular episode when a photographer doing a magazine feature on successful Atlanta business women wanted Julia to pose straddling a stool with a pearl necklace in her mouth.

Julia will not have it and she gives the photographer a piece of her mind:

"I'm saying I want you and your equipment out of here now. If you are looking for somebody to suck pearls, then I suggest you try finding yourself an oyster. Because I am not a woman who does that, as a matter of fact. I don't know any woman who does that, because it's stupid. And it doesn't have any more to do with decorating than having cleavage and looking sexy has to do with working in a bank. These are not pictures about the women of Atlanta. These are about just the same thing they're always about. When you start snapping photos of serious, successful businessmen like Donald Trump and Lee Iacocca in unzipped jumpsuits with wet lips, straddling chairs, then we'll talk."

Lydia is cut from the same cloth as Julia Sugarbaker.

Lydia is strong,

proud,

and as determined to succeed in the purple linen trade
as Julia was in interior design.

Lydia is the role model of a confident, "lean in" kind of woman,
as comfortable in the boardroom as she is in the boutique.

She succeeds against overwhelming odds to find her place in a man's world.

III

Now consider Lydia's place on the Sabbath—
 down at the riverside at a prayer meeting with the other women.

I picture the women gathering every Sabbath to share burdens,
 to support one another,
 to offer their prayers,
 and to worship God.

Sadness and suffering can drive a woman to prayer.

Alice Walker's great novel *The Color Purple* is a prayer book.

It consists of a young woman's prayers to God that tell the story of how,
 in spite of years of abuse, suffering, and mistreatment,
 she finally learns how to laugh and to love and to play.

There is great power whenever women gather to pray.

Notice that as Lydia and the sisterhood of prayer meet at the river,
 there are no men in the gathering—
 no minister or rabbi to do the preaching.

What will the women do?

When God's people have no officially ordained clergy,
 they do what God's people have always done—
 they "clergy" on.

In his recent book [Why Priests? A Failed Tradition](#), history professor Gary Wills shows us that the early church had no priests.

Jesus was not a priest, nor did he ordain any.

Priests are not found in the Book of Acts or in the writings of Paul.

It was only later—

well into the second century of the Christian era—
that the tradition of priests set apart to say Mass
and administer the sacraments arose.

And yet early Christians did what Christians have always done:

they preached the word,
taught,
baptized,
shared the Lord's Supper,
all with or without the benefit of clergy.

Lydia's home becomes the spiritual center of the entire city,
and Luke implies that she is the spiritual leader of the fledgling Christian
fellowship of Philippi.

It is further evidence that there is no biblical justification for denying ordination to
women who are called by God and who are just as capable,
committed,
and gifted, as are men.

IV

Into this riverside gathering of strong, independent, God-fearing women comes the
message of the Gospel.

Lydia's response to Paul's message is immediate:

“The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.”

Lydia's eagerness is a gift of grace.

Only an open heart can produce eager faithfulness.

Lydia's heart is open and her faith becomes immediately active.

She is baptized along with her whole household.

They didn't wait to schedule the baptism for weeks or months later—
it was done right away.

It reminds me of that scene in the movie "O Brother, Where Art Thou," where scores of people are coming to the river to be baptized, and they are all singing:

*As I went down to the river to pray,
Studying about that good old way
And who shall wear the starry crown,
Good Lord, show me the way!*

*Oh, children, let's go down, let's go down, come on down.
Oh, children, let's go down, down in the river to pray.*

Can you picture it?...Lydia in her finest purple linen!

You don't run fine linen through the washing machine and toss it in the dryer!

Yet, this woman of means,
of dignity...
this self-sufficient CEO of her own company...
throws all such caution to the wind.

She is baptized right on the spot.

She emerges from the river dripping wet,
her hair going every which way,
and her purple linen suit completely ruined.

But she doesn't care.

“The Lord opened her heart,” and that is all that matters.

When the Lord gets a hold of you the way she got a hold of Lydia,
nothing else matters.

V

And now consider Lydia opening her home to Paul and his companions.

Social, cultural, and religious barriers crumble,
and this one small corner of the Roman Empire begins to be transformed by
God's grace.

Luke says that Lydia “prevailed upon” (NRSV) Paul and his companions to stay
with her and accept her hospitality.

There is only one other place in the New Testament where this Greek word is used:
in Luke 24:29, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus on Easter evening,
prevail upon the risen Lord to stay with them that night (Luke 24:29).

The verbal echo is no coincidence.

An open heart and an open home equal Christian hospitality.

Lydia makes a radical response to the Gospel.

Her business is even jeopardized, because her clientele are the very people who in
the next passage have Paul and Silas arrested and thrown in jail.

Lydia risks everything for her new-found faith.

As lives are transformed and hearts opened in faithful discipleship,

the fellowship of the risen Lord continues to extend out into the world.

As we come to the end of the Easter season,
 we continue to experience and to live out that fellowship,
 “prevailing upon” the world to be open to the grace of God in the
 risen Christ.

It is a powerful thing when a woman says, “I give you my heart.”

Lydia stands in the long line of women who have opened their hearts to God,
 and it is incumbent upon us to remember them today.

Remember Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho, who sheltered the Hebrew spies and became one of four bold and faithful women who Matthew 1 lists in the family tree of our Lord.

Remember Ruth, who was willing to risk everything in remaining loyal to her mother-in-law Naomi and was the great-grandmother of King David.

Remember Esther, who boldly went before the king to plead for the deliverance of her people from the evil machinations of Haman.

Remember Priscilla, who, along with her husband Aquila, was a faithful partner with Paul the Apostle.

Remember Phoebe, the deacon who delivered arguably Paul’s most important letter, the Epistle to the Romans, to the brothers and sisters in that great city.

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe,” Paul writes and we forever recall her crucial contribution to the early church.

Remember Monica, the mother of St. Augustine—who prayed faithfully for her son to come to faith in Christ.

If you have a woman like Monica praying for you,
 how can you not open your heart to God?

Remember St. Clare, who shared the ministry of the downtrodden with St. Francis of Assisi.

Remember St. Julian of Norwich, who in the 14th century said,

“Our Savior is our true Mother in whom we are endlessly born and out of whom we shall ever come.”

By the way, Julian’s work, *Revelations of Divine Love*, was the first book by a woman ever published in the English language.

Remember the ladies.

Every man who stands in a pulpit today, me included, was taught the Bible and received his basic theological instruction from a woman Sunday school teacher.

A woman taught us to name the books of the Bible at Vacation Bible School.

A woman taught us how to pray,
 how to read our Bibles,
 how to love our neighbors,
 and how to love Jesus.

How long will some Christians tolerate the patently absurd notion that a woman’s place is not in the pulpit?

VI

So, where is a woman’s place?

In the past we have heard it said that a woman’s place is in the home,

cooking, cleaning and taking care of her husband and children.

A woman's place, some have crudely said, is
"barefoot, pregnant, and in the kitchen."

Well, I'd like to turn that phrase on its head.

A woman's place is...
wherever she chooses to be,
wherever she gives her heart,
wherever she puts her intelligent, creative, and nurturing power to work.

A woman's place is wherever she finds fulfillment, purpose, and joy.

A woman's place is wherever she makes it,
wherever God guides her and opens doors for her.

A woman's place may be in her own home...
or in the White House,
as CEO of a corporation...
or CEO of three kids.

The Vatican could benefit from a woman pope...
and the United States could benefit from a woman president
(Although at this point it's anybody's guess who she will be!).

When a woman makes a place, it is truly a place.

It is a place of honor and dignity...
a place for others because of its unselfishness...
a place for growth and warmth and healing.

A woman may be the best maker of place in the world,
often against overwhelming and abusive odds

and with huge male opposition.

Think about all the women who have made a place for you in their lives—
 your mother, of course,
 but also the women you've known who are successful...teachers,
 lawyers,
 real estate agents,
 office administrators,
 bankers,
 physicians,
 homemakers,
 nurses,
 scientists,
 and yes, pastors.

Take a moment today and remember the ladies.

Remember our mothers—
 those who are still with us,
 still making a place of love, warmth, and nurture for
 their children and grand-children...
 their nieces and nephews...
 their friends and neighbors...;
 and those who have gone to a place not made with hands—
 a place reserved in heaven,
 a place created not just by God the Father,
 not just by an act of Jesus Christ the Son...
 but also by the creative, nurturing, feminine power of the Holy Spirit.

**And that, my friends, is a woman's place
 and our best chance for heaven on earth!**

Amen.

Sources:

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