

She Prevailed Upon Us

May 13, 2007

Rev. Broadbent:

Thank you Abby and Hannah for stepping in as liturgists this morning. Abby you did a very good job with a passage that has a lot of strange names in it. I learned in seminary that the right way to say any weird name in the Bible is with confidence. There is no standard way of saying it, and you have to figure it out. You just say it, and that's the way it's pronounced. It's a beautiful job.

How to preach, what to preach on the Sunday following Jack Spong. It's been in my mind all week, and I even got the comment this week of "Oh, isn't Spong great. Yeah, he was really great." And this person said, "I haven't heard a sermon that good in a long, long time." Yeah, it was very good. It was very good. It was a very good sermon.

So how to preach and what to preach. Jack Spong did a wonderful job last week of opening up to us the beginning passages of Matthew and explaining why there are four women in that genealogy and the role of those women and the hidden message of the power of the Gospel that through these women our Lord was born. So today we have the story of another woman. This one, named Lydia. Lydia was from Thyatira – just say it with confidence – Thyatira and she was a dealer in purple cloth, which means that she was probably a person from an upper class family, not only because she had her own business, namely a dealer with cloth, but purple cloth, which was a color worn by the noble class. So she was a dealer in purple cloth who dealt with those of a noble class.

She is encountered by a group of Christians, though we know that they were not yet called Christians. They were followers up "the way," which Bishop Spong pointed out. He also shared with us a phrase that has become meaningful for a number of us. I know this because you have shared this with me, and I have felt it myself. Those who had experienced Jesus, those who were part of the Jesus movement, those who were living out the Jesus experience. So that as they went and preached and toured, they weren't quoting any New Testament scripture, they were living that. They were sharing what was on their hearts and sharing what was going on in their experience.

Just before the passage that Abby read, we learned that Paul had intended to loop back into Asia Minor, loop back into the territory that he had already been through. But he had a vision; and in this vision, the Spirit urged him to get on a boat, to cross the sea, and to go into an altogether new land to him, which is Europe. This, right here, this passage, is the story of the Jesus experience going into uncharted territory and crossing into Europe. And Lydia becomes the first convert in Europe. A woman becomes the first European convert. She is the person who is symbolically that next stage in growth of the Jesus experience.

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I thought it was quite convenient that this is the lectionary passage on Mothers Day, because it was not just Lydia but all of her household. She was probably not married, because there's no mention of a husband. She is the one who has a household, who has her own business, and who is able to invite those visitors back to her own household. Now who is part of that household? We don't know. Maybe some children. Maybe some siblings. Maybe sisters-in-laws who had been widowed. Perhaps her own servants and slaves.

Some in the history of the church have pointed to this very passage to show why infant baptism should be a practice of the church, because Lydia becomes baptized, along with her whole household. So the baptism in this early experience of the church becomes a blessing for people of all ages of that household

But did you get the feeling, those of you who heard Bishop Spong's speech last week, that we can't really go on, as if nothing has changed? But he said some things and shared some perspectives that are going to cause us to have to reorient, to shift, to challenge some of our assumptions, to step out into uncharted territory.

One of the questions that has come up for me, having heard him speak, is yes, the details of the story. But what is the story that we are not aware of? There has to be some story around Lydia, and yet we don't know what it is. We don't know all about who she was or how she came to be or what happened to her after this point. All we know is that she was an important person, a crucial person in the growth of the Jesus movement.

Aren't our Moms ultimately mysteries? We tend to appreciate on this day, this Mother's Day, we think of those wonderful things that they do for us. And well we should. But our Moms are also real people and have their own struggles and flaws. In fact, when I say our Moms, I mean not just the person who pops into your mind immediately, but mothers with their own children, mothers who have adopted children, mothers who are married, mothers who are single, mothers who are partnered with another mother. Women who maybe have not had children, but in their relationships with others have a mothering role. Men who think of themselves as mothering. Motherhood means so much more than what our greeting cards tend to limit motherhood to. And yes, we should give cards. And yes, we should celebrate that. But let's not stop there.

As I prepared for this Sunday, I also prepared for a memorial service. A member of our church, one who did not have biological children of her own, died two Thursdays ago. She joined our church June 13, 1965, having transferred her membership from Lodge Pole, Nebraska, to First Congregational of Colorado Springs. Her name was Edith Sine. And those of us who attended were not quite

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sure how many would show up. In fact, those of us who attended this service last Wednesday were hoping that it would be more than just us. We were hoping a half dozen, maybe a dozen. See, the reason is that Edith has been suffering from dementia and then Alzheimer's for about the last ten years. People weren't quite aware of whether she had friends. We were aware that she didn't have close family. She did have some distant family, a few of which sent a wonderful bouquet of flowers. But we were hoping that some folks would show up. And they did. There were about 17 of us who gathered in the Chapel on Wednesday to remember Edith.

As we tried to piece together her life, we found that not one of us had any handle on who she was. I started out, "Edith Sine was born on December 27th, 1919. I'm not sure where. But she grew up on a farm outside of Lodge Pole, Nebraska." Then I asked the others, "How am I doing?" And everyone went [signed an okay]. "Sounds good to us." "She was one of five siblings, either the second to the youngest or the youngest. Does anyone know? No, but it's one of those. Okay, let's go on." And the scripture for the day, which was offered by Reverend Jerry Jordan, was Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. This seemed appropriate at first, because, for many of us, Edith, over the past ten years, had become that lost sheep. As the dementia took hold, as the Alzheimer's picked up speed, she became increasingly nervous and especially afraid of being alone. And we were very, very aware as a group that she was a very lonesome woman. And yet there were people in this congregation who visited her on a regular basis over a period of years or months.

A particular couple in the group had become her Power of Attorney, so they could make decisions for her when she couldn't make those decisions for herself. And a peer who was available to her at all hours of the day when she called sometimes too many times a day, but who had faithfully served that friend of hers.

One thing we all remembered about Edith was that she smoked. Some who attended over the last few decades remembered that she would sometimes smoke in the church kitchen. Our kitchen witches wouldn't let you get away with that today. She would sometimes leave the service to go have a smoke and then come back. And if you had visited her at her house, her house had that musty, smokey scent.

When I think of that scent, I think of my grandmother. And I know there are others of you, because scent is so connected with memory that even though that's not what you would call a pleasant scent, it sure does bring forth a very pleasant memory.

My grandmother was a chain smoker for a number of decades, and yet I can remember her kind of gravelly voice and the things that she would say to me. She didn't usually say "I love you," but she would show me in other ways. Now

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I didn't figure it out until I was an adult that the money she would put in my birthday cards was her way of saying, "I love you." It took me years to figure that out.

And so, in my mind, Edith and my grandmother are "mothers" who aren't perfect, who certainly had their own struggles, but who were mothers nonetheless. And then we heard in the memorial service for Edith Sine a story. The story is that Edith had a sister who lived in California. This sister of hers was quite ill and was a widow. Edith had just gone through hip surgery. We're not sure how long before, but it was on her hip. That must have still hurt as she recovered from that surgery; but still, Edith flew out to California to go be with her ailing sister.

When she arrived, she determined that the illness was quite serious. So she went about getting her sister's business in order for her. She decided which of her sister's things to sell and which of her sister's things to give away, and what few precious things to keep. Then she went to the work of selling her sister's home. Now we're not even sure what her sister's name was, but we knew that this happened. We knew that Edith then brought her sister back to Colorado Springs, where her sister lived for about six weeks. Then Edith, on her healing hip, accompanied her sister's body back to California and made the arrangements to have her sister's body buried next to her husband.

The lost sheep. See, Edith went and sought out the lost sheep.

People are so much more complicated. There is so much of a story and a mystery than any of us can put together. Our Moms included. And so when we hand out flowers to the women whom we appreciate today, we hand them not only to that idea of a mother but more importantly, we hand them to the actual person, to the actual humans that you are, and we say, "I love you, not because you conformed to what I think a mother should be, but because of who you are."

And we think of Lydia. The mother of our faith. And we are open to wonder what her story is. What her victories and what her struggles were. What she meant to her household and what she means to this household of faith.

Amen.