

“Women of Worth”

Last week the reading from the Acts of the Apostles was about a vision that Peter had, wherein he saw all sorts of animals lowered down on a sheet. He was told in the vision that he was permitted to eat of any of the animals even those that his religion had told him were unclean and therefore unfit to eat. We saw how this revelation was about much more than food. After he had the vision he realized that he could share a meal with those who ate foods that had been prohibited to him. This revelation further showed him and the council in Jerusalem that the Gentiles had been given the gift of the Holy Spirit and could be brought into the household of God. This vision was important not because Peter could now eat bacon, sausage, and oysters, but because all the people of the world had access to the Holy Spirit.

This week’s reading tells us about a vision that Paul received. This vision does not require interpretation but action. Paul sees a man asking him to come to Macedonia for they are in need of the Gospel. Paul and his friends decide to go to Macedonia forthwith. What is most remarkable about this is that Macedonia is in Europe. Paul is called to take the Gospel outside of the Middle East into the broader geographical context of Europe. And so they set sail.

When they get to Philippi (a town named for the father of Alexander the Great) Paul and friends hang around waiting for the Sabbath to come. Normally they would then go to the local synagogue and preach to those gathered. Instead, he and his group go outside of town to a place where he thinks people go to pray. Instead of going to the synagogue, perhaps he is looking for the man from his vision and not finding him in town he goes outside the walls to see if he will find him there.

Instead of finding the man from the dream he finds a group of women. These women are what Jews of the time called “God-fearers.” They are Gentiles who are curious about the God of the Jews or maybe had even decided to accept YHWH as the true good. However, they have not taken the step of converting to Judaism.

Paul and company sit down with this group of God-fearing women and talk with them. The most prominent of them is Lydia, a trader in purple cloth. At the time purple dye was difficult to make. It required boiling marine snails in lead pots for days creating an awful odor. Cloth colored with this dye was expensive. Only royalty and the very wealthy could afford it. That tells us that Lydia was probably well off. Lydia appears to be a smart and skilled businesswoman (note that there is no mention of a husband or her being a widow). after talking with Paul Lydia makes the decision to be baptized and to have **her** household baptized also.

Thus the first European convert to Christianity is a woman. Lydia joins Mary Magdalene who was the first to see the risen Christ and the woman at the

well was the first evangelist for Jesus as another woman who is a ground-breaker in the Christian story. Lydia will house Paul and his retinue in Philippi. She also becomes a confidante of Paul's.

As we know from the Gospels it was out of the generosity of women that Jesus and his disciples were financially supported. We hear about Lydia in this passage and there are other women converts such as Priscilla, Tabitha, Rhoda, and Eunice. They show up in the Book of Acts and in Paul's letters. The essential work of women comes right down to today. Women do the work in Altar Guilds and Flower Guilds, as pastoral caregivers, teachers, and sustaining members of parishes.

Sadly, the patriarchy of the church suppressed the work and faith of the early female followers of Jesus and Christianity. Women who were leaders in the early Gentile church under Paul get swept under the rug. Their dedication, resilience, and conviction which were essential to the spread of the faith, becomes a foot note rather than a headline.

I am sad not only that their dedication has been overlooked, but also that my brothers have seen it necessary to put women in their place. I celebrate all persons who do the work of God. I am glad to put my shoulder to the wheel with anyone who wishes to work in God's name to help the poor, the orphaned, the widow, the outcast and to build communities of loving kindness anywhere in the world.

I hope that my brothers in this parish will also celebrate the work of all disciples and most especially their wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters—biological or spiritual. As we are told in Genesis all people are made in God's image, male and female.¹ No one is to take a back seat because of gender in God's kingdom. That may be the way of the world, but it is not the way of God.

Let us celebrate the Good News that all are welcomed into the Kingdom of God regardless of the way we label them. For as St. Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians, "...in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."²

We are all one. We are all loved equally by God. We all have an equal share in God's glory. Let us go forth arm in arm to love and serve the Lord our God, today and every day to come.

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Galatians 3:26-28 NRSV