

“Willingness and Welcomes”

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Acts 16:9-15

Well, as Eugene Peterson’s *The Message* has it: “She wouldn’t take no for an answer.” She, being Lydia, of course. Her “name” is what is called an “ethnicon,” a name that links to a place or tribe. Lydia stands for “the Lydian woman,” who is originally from the city of Thyatira in the region of Lydia, a region in Asia Minor, the southwestern portion of modern-day Turkey. And she is commonly known as “The Woman of Purple,” because we are told that she was a merchant that traded in dyes (maybe textiles). Who is she? Likely a Greek woman, perhaps a widow, managing her own household without the guidance of a man. A woman who is living in Philippi, at least when she meets St. Paul and his companions (Silas, Timothy, and likely Luke), on St. Paul’s Second Missionary Journey. And guess what? They didn’t meet Lydia in a Starbucks or gastro pub. On Facebook? No. The place is more like a fishing hole. They meet at a prayer meeting, on the Sabbath, at a gathering of women “somewhere” along the river. All we are told is that Paul and his companions go outside the gate by the river, “where we supposed there was a place of prayer.” (16:13)

Why gather for prayer by the river? Some writers suspect that Philippi didn’t have a synagogue, which may explain the odd location. Other writers believe that the women were in some kind of building, perhaps a house near the river. The Greek word used (*proseuchē*) can suggest a place of prayer, but can also simply point to the act of praying (it is actually a participle). This is a great reminder that words are always subject to our interpretation, and rarely is the work of interpretation clean, neat and matter of fact. What we do know is that Paul, without explanation or apology, takes his place with the women and begins to talk with them.

One of the women, dubbed Lydia, (known for “worshipping God,” which probably was code for a Greek person who believes much like a Jew but lives like a Gentile), listens with intensity as Paul talks. And she believes (what Paul is talking about). What exactly she believes we are not told, but it is her readiness that grabs our attention. And her willingness is outdone only by the openness of her heart and her capacity to welcome and persuade. Peterson’s paraphrase puts it this way: “As she listened with intensity to what was being said, the Master gave her a trusting heart—and she believed! After she was baptized, along with everyone in her household, she said, in a surge of hospitality, ‘If you are confident that I’m in this with you come home with me and be my guests.’ We hesitated, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer.” (vv. 14, 15)

On this Rose Sunday, the Sunday of Memorial Day Weekend, let us desire one thing: To live, die and be remembered for our willingness to say “Yes” and our eagerness to welcome. A genuine willingness comes as a result of practicing being hopeful and open, praying often that the Spirit

will give us “a trusting heart,” to use Peterson’s phrase. Of course, we dare not, all of us, prepare exactly in the same way for the same thing, to do so would be inefficient and possibly redundant. But being prepared in our own way is the larger point. Preparing involves staying in shape, spiritually, that is, working at staying available, maybe like the pianist, the gymnast, the second-baseman, or the chef, the eager grandparent, uncle or aunt. Picture yourself working a little each day at staying spiritually limber. Chopping carrots and practicing throwing to first base are different efforts than learning a music scale or balancing on a beam, or taking time with child. But doing these things over and over is the primary way we learn how to do them well. And until the heart is willing and trusting, well, the body will not stay committed to the practice regime. Is your heart, is mine, willing?

When the next best idea comes, will you, will I be ready? When the next request or task is revealed to us, we will say “Yes?” Let’s stay poised and aligned, stay together and available, listening with intensity to the whispers of the Holy Spirit, and get ready to say: “I’m in. I’m in this with you.” It is what Lydia said.

And I pray we will be remembered for our willing hearts that are outdone by our hospitality. Lydia doesn’t just open her heart, she opens her home. She may have lived in a larger-than-normal first-century dwelling; we don’t know. It may have simply been her willing heart that opened the front door of her small house. Either way, “Come stay with me” is what she says, “if you think I’m in this all the way.” And Paul and his companions do. And when we get to verse 40 of chapter Acts 16, after Paul and Silas are released from prison, we read: “After leaving the prison, they went to Lydia’s home; and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.” Reading between the lines, which so often we must do, I can hear Silas say to Paul, “We need a place to rest and recharge, and I know the perfect place. Let’s go to Lydia’s.”

The word “hospitality” is a very close cousin to the word “hospital,” a place that is meant to bring healing and wholeness. True hospitality isn’t an offer for an inexpensive vacation but an experience of finding emotional, mental and spiritual healing. And I want to think that staying at Lydia’s home was such a place and experience. What do you say, let’s work at making sure people experience us that way, us, together. None of us, by ourselves, can own, operate and offer private healing centers for people. But, together, if we pool our willing hearts, well, together we can do quite a lot.

On this day, a day for remembering, Lydia’s day, let’s put a rose in our bouquet for her. And let us rededicate our life together, to live and work, worship and serve in ways worthy of remembering. So that the people who know us best continue to say of us – “I know the perfect place. We’ll go there. Those people won’t take no for an answer.”

Let the church say, “Amen.”