

Acts 16:9-15 Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 Psalm 67 or John 5:1-9

OPENER:

A few years ago, online quizzes became the newest and best thing on the internet. These quizzes (which were a clear descendant of women's lifestyle magazine quizzes) are eye-catching and fun to take, with titles like:

“What city should you live in?”

“What *Friends* character are you the most like?”

“What *Harry Potter* house do you belong in?”

AND, most recently, “Which house on *Game of Thrones* are you a part of?”

At some point, there also appeared one which asked:

“Which one of Jesus' disciples are you the most like?”

(By the way, I took 3 separate of those and was “St. Andrew” each time.)

These quizzes are not scientific, of course, but fairly harmless, other than maybe for work productivity.

That last quiz has a flaw. In addition to being able to be “Judas” according to their algorithm, in those quizzes, one has to be a male disciple, or at least in all the ones that I tried.

Now there is a typology of female disciples, lurking in the culture of Christian seminars and conversation, but unfortunately it's a binary one: the classic “are you a Mary or are you a Martha?”

That choice comes from the story in Luke's Gospel where Jesus visits the home of Martha and, while they were there, Mary “sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying” while Martha “was distracted by her many tasks.” Jesus declares that Mary “has chosen the better part.”¹ In this division, one can either be attuned to the spiritual values *or* the material concerns of the world.

This division of women's role into those two is not, of course, what Jesus meant but sometimes that is what ends up happening, as women (and maybe men too) are pigeon-holed into those two archetypes: the contemplative and spiritual Mary VERSUS the hard-working but distracted Martha.

¹ Luke 10:38-42.

ACTS of the APOSTLE:

Luckily, our reading from the Acts of the Apostles delivers another example or model, in the person of a woman named Lydia who makes a brief but all-important appearance in scripture.

In our first reading, we hear how Lydia combines the roles of Mary and Martha, she provides spiritual care **and** wisdom along with lodging and hospitality. She is a woman who does both of those things,

She is therefore, as my wife said, when I was describing the outlines of this sermon to her, how Lydia is both Mary and Martha, she said:

“Oh, so you mean she is like most women.”

In another cliché of gender relations, Lydia’s big moment in the Christian story comes about because Paul and his lieutenants, having followed a vision and crossed the sea, promptly get lost and don’t know quite where they are or where they are supposed to be. They seem to have refused to do what so many men have done over the centuries: stop and ask for directions.

In their defense, the Holy Spirit blows where it will. Paul had come to Lydia in Philippi because of the Holy Spirit’s direction. Paul had been doing just fine in Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, when he receives this dream where a “Man of Macedonia” urges him to cross the sea into this new land and preach the Gospel of there.

When they get to Philippi, Paul and his followers are kind of just wandering around in a new environment, perhaps a hostile one to Paul’s message, with no clear direction or sign of where to go.

LYDIA:

Into that vacuum of confusion, Lydia fills the void and becomes an agent of the Holy Spirit. We learn that Lydia was someone searching for God in her life. She is a “seller of purple” which means that she is a trader in expensive cloth, someone with a household big enough to support Paul and his entourage, and hospitable enough to offer it up.

Lydia is an unlikely source of help on so many levels. She is a woman in the 1st century, she is probably a widow, she is a Gentile living in a strange land. But she had the most important attributes: she had an open heart willing to listen to God. She had an open heart willing to listen to Paul's testimony, to the good news, she had an openness ready to have been baptized, and then one that opens up her household to Paul and his followers.

The final line: "And she (Lydia) prevailed upon us"² is revealing. In ancient culture, as in today, there would have been this back and forth where Paul, the guest, would have declined the kind offer to stay, and Lydia would have again offered to "pick up the check", to put them up.

You can imagine them going back and forth a few times before Paul relents thanking his lucky stars that he found this saint in this foreign land.

Paul had been sent to see a Man in Macedonia but instead he meets a Women from Lydia (the region he just left), named Lydia, who shows him the way.

IRONIES:

Thus, ironies and deep truths abound in this story about Paul's encounter with Lydia in Macedonia.

It was a historic one and an important one for the church because Lydia was the first Christian convert, the first to be baptized in the continent of Europe.

From this seemingly haphazard encounter between Paul and Lydia, we see how the Christian mission was reversing the military path of Alexander the Great, who also originated in Macedonia. It was setting the spread of Christianity on a collision course on the road to Rome.

From Europe, Christianity would, of course, spread all throughout the world.

HOLY SPIRIT:

We are in the Easter season, where we are learning how the disciples responded to the Resurrected Christ, with all of our lessons are pointing to the next great big Feast of the Church, Pentecost, where we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit and we think about God's mission on this earth, to spread the Gospel to its four corners, in all different languages, to all different peoples.

² Used only one other time in the Bible, in the Emmaus story (Luke 24.29) where the disciples prevail upon Jesus to stay at their house.

This story articulates how the Holy Spirit works in surprising and unexpected ways. How God turns mustard seeds, and unleavened bread, fig trees, and widowed textile workers into the builders of the Kingdom of God.

Luckily we don't need to look all the way back to Lydia to see this sort of example. We need look no further than the name of our own Daughters of the King group here at Good Shepherd—the “Mary Martha” Chapter. The Daughters of the King exemplify the dual nature of discipleship, action and contemplation. Service and prayer. Martha *and* Mary.

CONCLUSION:

Lydia's role in that story is minor, in a sense, she features only in this one chapter in the Bible. She shows up only one more time, when Paul gets out of jail, where do you think he goes? You can picture Lydia opening up her house again to the weary missionaries.

But she sets the pattern, and gets credit for being there at the moment that it all starts where God's mission reveals itself as more inclusive, more broad, more surprising than we can imagine. When there seems to be barriers and impediments, the Holy Spirit shows us the way.

In that way, Lydia's story becomes our story because, the author of Acts switches to the 1st Person when telling in this story so as to invite us into this drama, and to join with Paul and Lydia and all of them to engage in this great journey.

That journey includes unexpected stops and plans that are not necessarily strategic, with unexpected help along the way.

In our personal lives, and in our life as the Church, we are sometimes prevented from going along the path that we expected, and instead have to take a detour to uncharted lands.

In that journey, we know that the Holy Spirit is guiding us and that there will be countless 'Lydia's' along the way to help us, to show us the way, to provide hospitality for us, and to help us learn about the Risen Christ.

AMEN