

"Woman, Thou Art Mighty!"

9.May.10

(also *Mothers Day*)

Acts 16:11-15

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Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been travelling on a missionary trip for quite a while. They eventually arrived at the city of Philippi and stayed there for several days. In that time and place, for a town or city to have a Jewish synagogue there must be at least ten married Jewish men living there. Since Philippi had no synagogue, then one can presume the Jewish population was very small. Hence, the local Jews gathered for worship outside the city, often by a river, a stream, or a spring. On that one Sabbath Paul and his companions went outside the city of Philippi to a nearby river. He perhaps discovered from some Jewish townsfolk (or non-Jewish residents) that this was where the few Jews in Philippi went to have prayer. He came upon a group of women gathered there. One of them was a woman named Lydia.

Interestingly enough, Lydia is the first woman in the New Testament to be described as a businesswoman (in those days quite a rarity). It must have taken tremendous determination and fortitude for her to make her way in a highly patriarchal society. She was so successful that she lived in a dwelling large enough to house Paul, his companions, her own family, plus several servants. Scripture tells us she was a worshipper of God. Though not fully converted to Judaism, neither had she become a full believer in Christ.

At the river bank Lydia heard the message of Jesus from Paul and became a believer. However, it was *not* Paul's preaching that brought about her conversion. It was *God*. In verse 14 we read, "The LORD opened her heart to listen..." Conversion belongs to God ... *not* to preachers! It is *God's* movement...the movement of the Spirit...that converts. (A sidebar here, if I may. Yes, believers and pastors do their best to spread the Gospel and witness to Christ and lead people to the Lord. However, it is God and the Spirit Who convict and convert.) Lydia and her household were then baptized.

Worship in Philippi eventually moved from the countryside and riverside to her home. Paul and Silas were later arrested and thrown in prison. When they were released, where did they go? To Lydia's house.

Given her high-profile and certainly influential position in the world of economics, business, and finance, there were *significant* risks for Lydia in opening her house to Christ worshippers. Why? Remember, what Paul, Silas, and Timothy were doing was seen by Roman officials as highly subversive and illegal!

Lydia was the first what we might now call "European" person won to Christ. Think about THAT ONE for a while. Moreover, her family and servants were probably the first Christian congregation in Philippi.

To the contrary of what many scholars and others think about Paul's view of women in the church, let's look at his letter to the Christians in Rome, Chapter 16. Here Paul writes to these Christians specifically asking them to "thank" or "treat with honor" 29 different men *plus* 10 women. Yes...10 women. So here we have mention of ten women whom Paul regards very highly for their work and leadership in the early Church. This chapter (Romans 16) should give people pause when they go about asserting that Paul did not feel women had a justifiable role in church or society.

Lydia exemplified the highest qualities of "lay leadership"...

- + she had a deep love for God...
- + she personally helped people
 come to know and love Christ...
- + she cared for those around her...
- + she grew spiritually...
- + she willingly took risks for the Church...
 ... someone who, as the saying goes,
 "was willing to run with scissors"...
- + she was a self-starter...
- + and she supported the mission and vision
 of the Church with her finances,
 her prayers, and her involvement.

Of course, the Hebrew Scriptures are also full of stories of women leading and helping. (E.g., see *Ex. 1:17-21; Joshua 2:1-16; Judg 4 & 5; 2 Kings 22:14-19; 2 Chr 34; also Miriam, Noadiah, and Isaiah's wife were prophetesses and leaders.*) You will recall that a good number of women were counted among Jesus' closest followers and became leaders of the faith after His ascension. Even at His crucifixion women made up most of those followers still standing on that hill. And it was to women that the Risen Christ first appeared after His resurrection (*Mt. 28:9-10*). Without question women were important in the life and faith of the early Church. With Paul especially it is very telling that he often seems unable to describe the church without mentioning the role of women.

There is a story that says it all, I think, about "mothers" and all women who mentor, teach, cajole, advise, instruct, and love, whether or not they themselves have children. The story speaks to the role of *all* women.

Tony Campolo is a well-known inspirational speaker and writer. He spends much of his time travelling the world on speaking tours.

In the meantime, his wife, Peggy, has chosen to stay home and give herself to the "bringing up" of their two children. On those rare occasions when she does travel with Tony, she finds herself engaged in conversations with some of the most accomplished and influential people in the world...After one such trip, Peggy told Tony that sometimes, as she visits with these powerful people, she finds herself feeling intimidated and even questioning her self-worth.

Tony said to her:

"Well, honey, why don't you come up with something you could say when you meet people that will let them know you strongly value what you do in the home, and that you feel it is urgent and important work."

Not long after that, Tony and Peggy were at a party...when a woman said to Peggy in a somewhat condescending tone, "Well, my dear, what do *you* do?"

Tony heard his wife say,

"I am nurturing two Homo Sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might become instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia God envisioned from the beginning of time."

The other woman replied, "O my...and I am just a lawyer."

Given the nature of the topic today, let me throw out some figures...

1. Women are presidents of numerous countries. For example: Ireland and Finland, Liberia, India, and Argentina
2. the Chancellor of Germany is a woman
3. the Prime Minister of Iceland is a woman
4. the Governor General of Australia is a woman
5. 17 women are currently Senators in the US Congress
6. in the past 30 years, 27 women have served as Governors of a state
7. 12 Fortune 500 companies are run by women
8. 21 large US Corporations are headed by women (*per Financial Post 500*)
9. as of 2004 (the most recent count I could find) 6% of all Protestant clergy are women. In 2010 this number is certainly larger.
10. if one looks even occasionally at the media one notices the increasing leadership role women are taking in highly visible positions, including in the fields of sports and finance

11. of 15 mainline Protestant denominations, women comprise 13% of the ordained clergy
12. in our own denomination, 22% of clergy are women and that number is rising
13. At Brite Divinity School, as a rule over the past decade, seminary women outnumber the men.

It seems self-evident that the world has more and more Lydia's as time moves forward.

To this day women of faith continue to do significant and broad ministry *within* and *for* Christ's Church, as well as in the home and community. At Memorial, the robust examples set by you women is to be emulated. At least for me, personally, it gives me great joy to say to each of you...and to good women everywhere,

"Woman.... thou art worthy...!"