

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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SERMON: *Lydia*

SERIES: *Sisters Acts*

SCRIPTURES: *Acts 16*

SPEAKER: *Shaun Kipe*

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**Credit to F. Scott Spencer;*

Well good morning it is good to worship with you all today. And happy 4th of July weekend. We've mentioned about the birth of the church just a month ago and this weekend is the birthday of our nation, so I hope you have some celebrations planned with friends and family this weekend.

If you have a Bible you can turn to Acts 16.

We're in the second week of our short two-week series called "Sisters Acts." **(SERIES TITLE GRAPHIC)** Taking a couple of weeks to highlight two women who were vital leaders in the early church community. Their stories are found in the book of Acts.

Last week we looked at the influence of Priscilla on the early church and her leadership in the church at Ephesus and discipleship of the young Apollos. And this week we want to take a look at

I. Lydia's Story

And before we are introduced to Lydia there's a little bit of background information we need to understand. And rather than the Scripture text on the PP screen, I'm actually gonna have a map on the screen, because I think that will be most helpful in understanding the Scripture I'm reading.

Acts 16 - ⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Ok, so Acts 16 Paul is in the midst of his missionary journey's. Going into Asia and Europe with the story of Jesus.

This is a somewhat mysterious passage about the Holy Spirit not allowing them to enter a certain location and then Paul has this vision of a man saying, “come preach to us in Macedonia.”, that he determines it is God speaking to him...And we'll come back to this “man of Macedonia” in a few minutes, but for now let's keep reading.

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district^[a] of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. “If you consider me a believer in the Lord,” she said, “come and stay at my house.” And she persuaded us.

Ok, there are just a number of important things going on in Lydia's story.

First thing we want to notice is the increasing

A. Diversity of the early church.

Keep in mind at this point in history, Christianity, is still a very Jewish faith. It started with Jesus in Jerusalem as the Jewish Messiah. Paul is a former Jewish religious leader and he is only just taking this new message to other parts of the world.

Philippi was a Roman colony, heavily gentile! In fact, there seems to be hardly any Jewish presence at all in Philippi and one of the indicators of the scarcity of the Jewish presence in Philippi is that it appears there is no synagogue in Philippi.

One of the things you pick up on as you read about Paul's visits to various cities and towns is that he almost always goes to the Synagogue first to share the story of Jesus.

So, there is a Hebrew word, **minyan** (everybody say that with me...minyan) which describes a quorum of **10 Jewish men in a given town in order to institute a Synagogue**. Kind of like a rule of thumb, you need to 10 Jewish men to have a synagogue. The Jewish presence in Philippi is so scarce, it seems they don't have this. No synagogue in Philippi for Paul to go and visit.

Paul is going into heavily gentile territory. And this led to one of the major questions in the early church was: **how does a Jewish Christian faith integrate into a gentile world?** There was a major culture clash happening in that early church.

And this caused significant debate in the early church. And you can read all about some of these details in Acts 15. Called the Jerusalem Council. And here's the major question...

What are simply cultural Jewish characteristics of the faith, that are not essential to following Jesus, **and what are the essentials of Christian faith?**

For example: In Judaism they had Kosher food laws. Like no eating pork or shellfish. Do the gentiles have to practice the food laws in order to follow Jesus? Is that a Jewish cultural practice or an essential of following Jesus?

Here's another one that created some discussion. All Jewish males were to be circumcised...do gentiles need to be circumcised in order to follow Jesus? You can imagine how that would turn some people off to message of Jesus. Is that a Jewish cultural practice or an essential of following Jesus?

Remember there is no manual that says well these are Jewish cultural practices and these are the essentials for following Jesus. Some of the early Jewish contingent in the early church had to let go of some of the cultural baggage they were attaching to following Jesus. As the diversity of within the early church began to grow.

And I think, in a sense, there is an incredibly important lesson here for us North American Christians as well. We also have a tendency to merge our Christian faith with our American culture. We have tied up our faith with some cultural baggage. Sometimes it's hard for us to distinguish between what is **American culture** and what is actually **following Jesus**.

We had an interesting discussion in our sermon prep meeting about some of the images that we see of Jesus, where he looks more "Caucasian" than Middle Eastern.

I was thinking about...

The format and style of our worship services...much of it simply our cultural style. The physical building itself is infused with North American culture. Which is fine. It has to be, it's the world we live...as long as we remember it isn't the building or the style or the service format that is sacred.

The worship music. Most of our worship music (whether you prefer what we call traditional or modern) all of it has North American Rhythm, sound, language. We must be careful that we don't make our rhythm, sound or language the essential thing.

And one of the biggest dangers of associating our faith with our culture is that, in the process we lose **an appreciation for diversity**. We don't like things that are different.

We too must wrestle with what are the cultural attachments we have to our Christianity and what is truly the essence of following Jesus. And this will become increasingly more important for future generations of followers of Jesus in North America as cultural diversity continues to expand within the country.

There's this great image of the church at the end of time in **[Revelation 7:9](#) - ⁹ After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.**

And so this week just as a practice of appreciating diversity and reflecting on the diversity that must have existed in the early church...

Try something new. Experience something new. Talk to someone new. Go somewhere new. Eat something new. I think we have to practice, even in these small ways...experiencing and learning to appreciate diversity. The Jews in the early church were forced into this as the church expanded into the gentile cultures.

But it wasn't just cultural diversity...what is interesting here is that when Paul doesn't find a Synagogue or group of Jewish men, he doesn't leave Philippi. He doesn't say, "*Well no men, no Synagogue...no church!*"

In fact, remember the vision he had calling him to Macedonia in the first place, it was of a "man of Macedonia". Paul could have said, "*No men, let's keep looking until we find this man of Macedonia.*"

Instead, Paul goes to the outskirts of town. Where he heard there was a group of women that met for prayer, led by the gentile convert Lydia!

Why is Lydia so important in this account? Why is she the key figure? Why is Lydia named in the story, but the Philippian jailer who accepts Christ just a few verses later is not named? I mean he got saved also and his household as well. Why does Acts highlight Lydia?

And I think at least part of the answer, is because Lydia, is the first Christian convert on the continent of Europe and her home, it appears, will be the first Church in Europe. The Church of Philippi was going to be started out of her home. Her resources, her hospitality, her heart that was opened up, her skills and gifts...It turns out Paul's man of Macedonia was not what he expected. Her name was Lydia.

One of the things we recognize in God's kingdom work is that he often chooses to use the unlikely, weak, the foolish according to the worlds standards. Mary and Mary, two women were the key witnesses to the resurrected Messiah. They were the first preachers of the Gospel, commanded to go and tell the other disciples. Priscilla was going to be an influential leader in the Ephesian church and now Lydia becomes the first "European Christian" and the Philippian church starts in her home...

We've talked about this concept before...it's the idea of **the upside down Kingdom**. Where the first are last and the last are first. Where the King rides a donkey and defeats enemies not by killing them, but by laying down his life for them. This is how God's Kingdom often works. Lydia is the first Christian in Europe.

Kind of reminded me of this great scene in the Lord of the Rings trilogy.

The trilogy is about a magic ring (**IMAGE OF RING**) that gives the owner of the ring supreme power, but in the process also corrupts the owner and the power of the ring is always used for evil. So the ring must be taken into the heart of the evil empire itself and destroyed. And in this scene all of the most powerful leaders of the known world (**elves, Kings and dwarves and warriors**) are gathering to decide who is going to take on this seemingly impossible and yet most important task and among this group is also a "**hobbit**"...also known as "halfling" because of their small stature...but watch how the scene unfolds...

Movie Clip (00:33–1:10; 1:38-2:06; 2:29-3:04) -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwK-iKtkV70>

I love this scene. All of the great hero's, warriors, elves, dwarves...in this story it is the hobbits, who are the hero's.

When we look at the story of Scripture, and people like Priscilla and Lydia, we soon discover this is how God often works...through the unlikely, the weak on the margins of society at the places you would least expect.

He chose the people of Israel as his example to the world.

He selected the stuttering Moses to confront Pharaoh.

He chose the Shepherd boy David and youngest in his family to be King.

When he needed someone to lead the church in Ephesus he chose Priscilla and when he was ready to start a church in Philippi he picked Lydia and a group of women who met for prayer on the outskirts of town.

This is what happens when we commit our lives to Jesus. He doesn't need us to be great and powerful. He just needs us to be faithful, prayerful, willing and obedient...and if you want to get in on the work He is doing...it's often on the margins of society at the places you least expect, among a group you may not have predicted or chosen yourself.

Lydia and the church in Philippi represent the incredible diversity of the early church...the inclusion of gentiles and women in the community of faith and beginning to take on these most significant roles.

This is perhaps why Paul would go on to write, **“There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female for all are one in Christ Jesus.”**

Ok, second thing to point out here...

B. Purple cloth and tent-maker ministry

Lydia and Priscilla help us to understand the value and importance of “market place ministry.”

One of the reasons I love the stories of these two Sister's Acts, Priscilla and Lydia is because they were both business women, did you pick up on that?

We are told in the story that Lydia is a dealer in purple cloth. In the first century world, purple was the color of royalty and often an indicator of a person's economic status. A dealer in purple cloth was likely selling clothing to senators, people of power. So, Lydia's job may have been more on the upper scale...a high end fashion

designer. A successful business woman and international trader. She owns her own home.

And if you recall we learned last week that Priscilla was a tent maker. Not a job that carries the same level of prestige as a dealer in purple cloth. But that's just the point isn't it? From Priscilla and Lydia we learn that God uses tent-makers and high-end fashion designers to do his work.

We have a tendency to separate our lives into **spiritual** and **secular**. My spiritual life is going to church, praying and reading my Bible and my secular life is everything else. Going to work, interacting with my family, my leisure activities and hobbies. But in Lydia and Priscilla we see these two aspects of life, spiritual and secular, coming together. Purple cloth ministry and tent-maker ministry.

Have you thought about how this happens in your life?

When I was preparing for this sermon I came across a Hebrew word/concept that highlights this idea.

Avodah (Ah'-voe-dah...everyone say that with me...Avodah). And in the Bible this word has two distinct yet intertwined meanings: It can mean **work** and it can also mean **worship**.

Exodus 34:21 - "Six days you shall work (avodah)."

It means to work. But in other verses, *avodah* means worship...

Exodus 8:1 - "This is what the LORD says: Let my people go, so that they may worship (avodah) me."

Do you see the linkage between these two words?

The sacred (spiritual) and the secular come together as we follow Jesus.

“If we cannot find God in the routines of home and work, then we will not find him at all.” (Foster 171)

In the 1600s, there was a monk named Brother Lawrence (**PIC OF BROTHER LAWRENCE**) whose job was dishwashing. He said he learned a profound truth that God's presence could be experienced even in the grind of daily, routine secular work. *“For me,” he wrote, “the time of activity does not differ from the time of prayer...in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are calling together for as many different things, I possess God in as great a tranquility as when upon my knees at the blessed Sacrament.”* He recognized God’s presence in his work.

I remember reading another story one time about a gentleman who, as a teenager spent the summer among the Eskimo people in Kotzebue, Alaska. As part of their work that week they were digging a trench for a sewer line. Digging by hand is a huge task anyway, even more so on the frozen tundra of Alaska. But the gentleman recalls, that as he faced this grueling challenge, an Eskimo man, whose face and hands displayed the leathery toughness of many Alaska winters came by and stood and watched for a while. Finally, the Eskimo man said simply and profoundly, **“You are digging a ditch to the glory of God.”** (Foster 172)

If you saw images of our students in the Bahama’s last week...they were doing very much the same thing.

That is purple-cloth and tent-maker ministry.

Lydia was a business women fashion designer and Priscilla was a tent-maker for Jesus. You don’t need to work in a church to share the Good News about Jesus. You don’t need to be a Pastor or Missionary.

Too often in today's world we have separated our lives into spiritual (what we do at church) and secular (what we do when we're away from church). That's why we often think we need to bring people to church to meet Jesus. Sometimes Jesus is saying get out into the world. Be in places where people are and in that venue...live like Jesus, show people Jesus by the way you act. By the way you talk. By the integrity with which you carry yourself. By your compassion. By your love. Your patience. Your self-control. This is your Avodah...the place where ordinary life and worship meet.

As a student, a teacher, a nurse, a doctor, a farmer, an engineer, a stay-at-home mom or dad...when you're bailing hay, or changing a diaper. This is the spiritual life with Jesus.

Author Oswald Chambers said it like: "**God comes into our mortal flesh and we do our ordinary work, in an ordinary setting, among ordinary people, as we would do it for Him.**"

I like the way *The Message* Bible interprets what Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome 12:1: "**Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering.**"

This week, each morning, I just want to invite you to take your ordinary life...work, play, family...whatever and offer it as a sacred and holy offering back to God to be His witness.

That is purple-cloth and tent-maker ministry.

Ok, final thing for this morning. There were numerous churches that Paul was associated with in the first century. (**MAP**) Ephesus. Corinth. Thessalonica. Rome. But of all the churches, Philippi...the church that meets or started in Lydia's

house...seems to be the one that get's the best marks from Paul. In most of his letters and dealings with the churches Paul spends much of his time "putting out fires." But much of what he says regarding Philippi is in Thanksgiving. I don't how much of that has to do with Lydia's influence...but I thought that's the kind of church we want to be...we too at Five Forks want to take on the character of Lydia's house church.

C. Let us be a house of Lydia

...a church like Philippi. Two things specifically Paul emphasized related to the Philippian church...

First,

1. Unity

Philippians 1:3-7 - I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...

The Philippian church is recognized as "partners in the Gospel." Paul's saying, you all are like a great team that has come together and stays focused on the main goal.

When we keep our eyes focused on the primary thing: knowing, loving, following Jesus...that leads to a powerful expression of unity. In other words, one of the ways that we can join Lydia and the early church in witnessing to the Good News of Jesus is by becoming a place of unity.

And I think the church has a lot of work to do in this area. It seems to me far too often the church has become known for what we stand against than what we stand

for. We have become known for all the ways we disagree and stand against people than for our unity.

What did Jesus say, “they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

Unity does not mean we are all the same. We started the message recognizing the incredible diversity in the early church. Unity means that even though we are all very different we are held together by our love for Jesus. Our partnership in the Gospel.

We want that kind of unity in Jesus at Five Forks.

And then second...the Philippian church was commended as

2. A place of sacrificial generosity.

Philippians 4:15-16 - ¹⁵ Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; ¹⁶ for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

If there’s one thing that we can do to join the early church in spreading the Good News story about Jesus this might be it...**sacrificial generosity**. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than laying down one’s life for a friend.” Sometimes this sacrificial generosity is with our finances or our wealth. Sometimes, it’s our time and our energy. Sometimes it’s giving up our rights or our benefits for the sake of someone else.

This week, you look for opportunities to practice sacrificial generosity...in your home, at work, with your family...wherever you are. I think Lydia would probably say it’s one of the most spiritual things you can do!

