

Holy Memory

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a

worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.

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In 2003, years of work that radio producer Dave Isay had done in the area of collecting and documenting the oral histories of average Americans was transformed into what is now called StoryCorps. The StoryCorps Project in conjunction with National Public Radio and the American Folk Life Center has to date recorded the stories and the memories of tens of thousands of people. With a permanent recording booth in Grand Central Terminal and at Ground Zero, and additional booths that travel all over the country, people two at a time enter this small room together to ask each other questions and have the opportunity to record and preserve the stories of their lives.

Dave describes the project in this way: “Each session represents an act of love and respect: forty minutes set aside to ask important questions and listen closely to the answers. The interviews honor families, friends, and elders: the ordinary people we find all around us who, in their day-to-day acts of kindness, courage, and humanity, embody the true spirit of our nation.”¹ He goes on to say, that for them each StoryCorps session is considered to be sacred.

There are plenty of stories of ordinary characters in scripture, people who we know so little about that we don’t even know their name, which is why when we come across a character like Lydia it makes us want to know as much as we can about her. Can you imagine if there had been a StoryCorps booth in the market of urban Philippi, maybe near where Lydia traded in purple cloth, and she had spent 40 minutes in there with a friend, sharing her memories and stories of what would become the first Christian community in Europe?

¹ Isay, Dave. *Listening is an Act of Love*. Penguin Books. 2007

The entire book of Acts, written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, is part travel log, part sermons, part miracles and visions, and part stories of all of the converts and controversies of the first Christian communities.

By Chapter 16 we are setting off with Paul and his companions, on what we have come to call his “second” missionary journey. Visited in the night in a dream by someone simply described as a man from Macedonia, Paul receives a call to go into this Roman province in the very northern regions of Greece. They traveled from Troas, to Thrase, and finally to Philippi, the only one of these cities that likely most of us have ever heard of before, mainly because of the church that Paul starts there, and the eventual letter he writes to the Philippians from inside a Roman prison.

It is during their stay in Philippi that Paul, Timothy, Silas and likely at least one another companion seek out ethnic and religious Jews with whom they might share the good news of Jesus Christ. But as a traditional Greek and now Roman occupied city, there would not have been a thriving synagogue or Jewish community there, which is what leads them to the city gates to look their fellow Jews.

It is there that they find not just a group of Jewish women gathering for prayer, but other women as well characterized as God worshippers. This would have been a technical term for Gentiles who were sympathetic to the Jewish community and maybe even interested in practicing Judaism, but who had not converted.

This is how Lydia is described to us, along with simple information about her work in trade.

It is almost more responsible to tell you all of the things that we don't know for sure about Lydia than the few things that we do know - even though for centuries Christians have tried to read between the lines to fill in the missing parts of her story.

We don't know if Lydia was a freedwoman, meaning that she had previously been enslaved, common among women in her profession. We don't know if she was wealthy or not, since it is still true today that just because you trade in a luxury item doesn't mean you can afford that item for yourself. We don't know if she was single, married, widowed or even divorced, which are all possibilities. We don't know if she had children, or servants or even slaves of her own or some combination.

We do know that she was Greek, that she was a Gentile, that she and whoever else made up her household were baptized upon not simply just experiencing the preaching of Paul, but through the movement of the Holy Spirit in her heart and that she had at least a big enough house with enough rooms to host four additional men.

And we know one other thing - Whoever she was, she was remembered by the earliest Christian community. Lydia's story, the memories of Paul and his companions' encounters with Lydia must have been significant enough for her to be remembered in this way and by name.

One of the first questions we ask when we encounter a piece of scripture for the first time, or the 500th time, is "why did they write down this story?" What value did it have for the community, that it was chosen to be remembered and preserved?

Usually by the end of working with a biblical story, we ask a similar question as well - what does it mean for me, for you, for the church, to claim this story, this memory that technically is not our own, to claim it for ourselves? To count Lydia not just as a mystery woman from the past, but as our own ancestor in faith? How do we make Lydia's story our story? This is actually some of the most vital work that we do to try to find meaning in scripture.

In his new book - *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in Its World for Our World*, outgoing Chaplain at Harvard and incoming Dean of the Wake Forest Divinity School, Jonathan Walton writes this of the value of narratives and storytelling in our reading of and our claiming of scripture as our own:

“Narratives pass down the powers of tradition. The strengths of shared stories include shaping appropriate moral dispositions to confront contemporary challenges. Ancient biblical writers understood this point well. As the Baptist preachers of my youth were known to say, “One should never let the facts get in the way of a good story.” Facts may inform, but stories shape our character. This is why biblical writers were so comfortable shaping histories with stories. Stories can convey eternal truths that the facts of life often miss.”²

It was almost twenty years ago now that my brother sat down with a tape recorder, my paternal grandmother and her sister, my great Aunt to have them record the stories of their lives growing up in rural Western Pennsylvania. I can remember listening to them tell stories about their childhood that I had never heard before, but clearly ones that were important to their identity and especially their sense of family. In the years since, as my dad and I talk about some of those stories and retell them to each other, it has become clear that neither of those women ever let the facts get in the way of a good story, but I don’t think ever without good reason.

The one story that they told that has never left my mind, and that I have grown to claim as my own story, and clearly a story of my ancestors was of their uncle Arthur. This story took place in 1919, before either of these women were born, so in fact it was a story that had also been passed down to them as they grew up.

The story goes, that Arthur was at work at the local mine, and a blast was set to clear out a new section. The men were all gathered outside of the mine waiting for the explosion to go off, and it never did. So one of them had to volunteer to go and check it out. It was their uncle Arthur, just 21, who volunteered to go into the mine to see what had happened. To Arthur he was the clear choice, the only one without a wife and children. It was after he entered the mine that the explosion finally detonated and he was killed instantly when a large rock fell on him.

Now the news article written in the local paper tells a slightly different story, but what you can hear on the tape of my grandmother and aunt not just telling the story to each other again, but in reflecting on it together is their deep appreciation for that kind of sacrifice for the sake of others.

² Jonathan L. Walton. *A Lens of Love: Reading the Bible in Its World for Our World*. W/KJ Press. 2018

It is exactly the kind of women that they grew up to be as well though were never in a position to make that kind of dramatic sacrifice on behalf of others, and when I reflect on the values passed down to my father and then to me, I think that this story is a pretty apt expression of the kind of essential moral values that they embodied. My family is full of nothing but ordinary people, but by telling this story and passing it down through the generations I can see that even within an unremarkable family tree it was still full of remarkable people, and claiming that story as my own story, I am willing to count myself among them.

The preserving and sharing of memories and stories also help us to claim the values and identity of our chosen communities as well - and the church community is no exception.

I myself, and my colleagues often join me in this, love to tell stories about the life of this congregation, especially when those stories help us to remember and claim for ourselves the values that have been passed down and shape our life together.

Some of my favorite are stories about Ada Mutch the daughter of Andrew Mutch who served as pastor here from 1912 until he retired in 1936. Moving here with her family from Scotland at age 7, she went on to live and work and serve in this community faith for literally 100 years. In her working life Ada was a nurse, ending her career as director of nursing for Lankenau hospital in 1970.

My guess is that no matter how many stories I could tell you about Ada this morning, many of you could tell me just as many if not more. But Ada herself, having been a part of this church for a century was able to preserve for all of us what could have been forgotten stories of this congregation - like stories of the first choir formed to lead the church in worship, her mother's victory garden planted during the war in the same location where our soon to be renovated Education Building now stands, and even a story I read this week, that I find very hard to believe, that the balconies here in the sanctuary were created for boarding students from Shipley, Baldwin, and Haverford to fulfill their compulsory worship attendance requirements- one balcony for the boys and one for the girls.

It was after her retirement that Ada became active in volunteering at ElderNet - one of our long standing partners in this community that advocates for and supports older adults, especially those who age in place. Ada served on their Board as well and in 2011 the ElderNet Community Resource Center in Bryn Mawr was opened in her name.

Just a couple of weeks ago the BMPC Hunger Committee, a supporter of the food pantry of ElderNet, met, and welcomed their new executive director so that he could come and share with us the current work that they are doing and the vision that they have for the work of supporting local seniors into the future.

And then members of the committee told him stories of Ada. They told Ada's stories and stories about her, sharing not just the facts of her life and her work for the community, but simultaneously sharing our identity as a place where people like Ada can find an outlet for acts of care and compassion. Claiming those stories as a church, retelling them, and passing them down are how we continue to shape this as our common identity as God's people in this place.

So why did they tell Lydia's story and why is her story, as slim as it is, our story as well?

Lydia's story is at its most basic a story of the diversity within the early Christian Community. It is in Paul's letter to the Galatians that he describes that within our common life in Jesus Christ that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. Lydia's story, even in the little that we know completely embodies those values. As a modern church we continue to seek to live into that identity as a community where the divisions and categories of the world don't keep us separated as believers. To claim Lydia's story is to have faith that the church still has the potential to live into that vision of inclusion and diversity.

Lydia's story is also one of radical hospitality. Not just opening her home to these traveling missionaries, but prevailing upon them with her insistent generosity. It is at the end of chapter 16 that Lydia and her household offer hospitality to Paul and his companions once again when they are released from prison returning back to her home. It is more than likely that Lydia's house - big enough to provide this

kind of hospitality, would go on to host meetings of what would become the church in Philippi.

When we claim Lydia's story as our own, we claim the essential truth that our generosity as Christians is not offered as a means of our salvation, but as a joyful response to it. That by being filled with the movement of the Spirit of God, we too are called to be insistently generous, and we recognize that it is only through a culture of shared generosity that we can ensure, just like patrons of early church like Lydia, that the church will have a home and a means of offering generosity and compassion to the world.

Lydia's story is our story, and when we remember her, we remember who we are called to be as builders of the church like she was. The sacredness of these memories claimed as our own continue to build the church generation after generation. We are called not just to claim them, but to tell them, to believe them, to preserve them, and to embody them.

May our stories and the stories of our common life together be worthy next chapters in the story of God's movement in the world. Amen.