

## ST. PAUL AND WOMEN



Acts 16:13 "On the sabbath day we (Paul, Silas and Timothy) 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 worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and (was) a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. (And) 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."

In the third chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Galatians he notably writes that: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no

longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3.27-28) This is one of the most idealistic statements about the character and nature of the early Christian Church, and as the Adult Bible Study group is learning, St. Paul really struggled to live out this vision of radical equality in the early Church, an equality that did not distinguish between Greek and Jew, between male and female, and even between slave and master, and at a time when both the Jewish and Roman cultures of that day did indeed make such important distinctions!

Last week, we saw some of that struggle in the early church for equality between Jews and Gentiles, especially in regards to circumcision and kosher food restrictions. The first great theological crisis in the early apostolic church was about whether and how to welcome in Greeks, that is gentiles or non-Jews, into this Jewish Christian movement of the followers of Jesus. Last week, in the eleventh chapter of Acts, the apostles and leaders of the church in Judea first heard that Gentiles, those non-Jews, had received the word of God in Caesarea and the Christian leaders in Jerusalem immediately responded to the news by calling St. Peter to return to Jerusalem and explain his actions at the house of Cornelius the Centurion. Soon thereafter the Christians in the city of Antioch, we are told, were also preaching to the Greeks, that

is, to Gentiles, and the leaders in Jerusalem sent Barnabas out to investigate for them. Then in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, as we saw last week, some other Christians from Judea came to Antioch saying that unless you were circumcised, you cannot be saved, and there was, we are told, 'no small dissension and debate about the matter.' Paul and Barnabas thereafter were sent by the church leaders in Antioch to Jerusalem, where the church held an Apostolic Council to consider this very controversial question about how to welcome Gentiles, and according to Acts apparently concluded that gentile Christians were modestly advised to keep certain aspects of Mosaic Law, like not worshipping idols, not the eating the meat of strangled animals, keeping chaste, and avoiding blood, though there appears to have been no clear decision there about circumcision for non-Jews. There was also an agreement that Paul's mission thereafter would be to the uncircumcised, while James, the brother of Jesus, and John, the son of Zebedee, would be missionaries to the Jews.

In Paul's letter to Philemon (which you won't hear this year until Labor Day weekend), we see the struggle to treat slave and master alike as equals in the eyes of God. And today, I believe we have a story that hints at Paul's struggle for real equality between men and women in the early church. That Paul's attitude that men and women were equal in the eyes of God is

surprising to many people, who only seem to remember assumed statements of Paul about women staying silent in church, and not being teachers, and deferring to their male counterparts, practices that would directly conflict with this statement of St. Paul's to the Galatians affirming that we are all one in Christ Jesus.

Now in today's reading, Paul and Silas are revisiting congregations that Paul and Barnabas had established on that first Great Missionary Journey. "Paul went on ~~also~~ to Derbe and to Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a (Christian) believer, but his father was a Greek. (Timothy) was well spoken of by the brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium. (And) Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (Acts 15.1-4). So perhaps there was indeed no real clear agreement about male circumcision for Gentiles by that Apostolic Council.

And then Paul has a vision of 'a man from Macedonia calling to them' to leave Asia Minor behind and cross over the Aegean Sea into modern-day Greece, to preach there in the largest city of Macedonia, Philippi, the capital of a Roman colony, which they did. But now in today's reading notice first that Paul

apparently did not go to the local Jewish synagogue to preach as he always did before in Asia Minor. For there had been problems with this practice of Paul preaching in synagogues on the sabbath during the First Missionary Journey, which you will hear more about next week. For now, remember that Paul and Barnabas were persecuted at Antioch of Pisidia and were driven from the city (Acts 13.50). In Iconium, the Jews molested and stoned Paul and Barnabas who then fled for their very lives (Acts 14.5). And in Lystra, the Jews came and stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing they had killed him (Acts 14.9). So interestingly, in today's story, Paul, a good Jew, a Pharisee, on the Jewish Sabbath day, went outside the city gates where there was a supposed place of prayer, and preached not to the Jews in a synagogue, but to the women who had gathered there by the riverside. Christianity will eventually leave the synagogues completely, and this will happen slowly over the next 80 years or so, but today's story may be the beginning of that trend.

Now the second thing I want you to notice in today's story from Acts is that one of those women who heard Paul preaching by the riverside outside the gates of Philippi was Lydia, a seller of expensive purple goods, and she was so moved by Paul's preaching that she and her whole household were baptized. St. Lydia becomes St. Paul's first known convert in Greece, and

therefore the first apparent Christian in Europe, and thus her fame ever since.

The third thing I want you to notice in today's reading is that St. Lydia after her baptism prevailed upon Paul and Silas and Timothy to come and stay at her house, to form a house church. As was often the case in the early days where women were not only the first to believe, or the first to see the Resurrected Jesus, but they were also the real backbone of the Christian community. Just as Martha and Mary of Bethany provided hospitality to Jesus and his disciples on several occasions when they visited Jerusalem, and just as the women who followed Jesus from Galilee provided for him from their own resources, we are told, so here St. Paul is provided and cared for by a wealthy woman in Philippi, a seller of expensive purple goods from Thyatira.

Despite later declarations that St. Paul was anti-women, numerous of his favorite co-workers in spreading the Gospel were remarkably women, who were then surely preaching and teaching as he was, and not necessarily deferring to the men. This was particularly a remarkable action in an age when men dominated society, when women couldn't own property, or even serve as legal witnesses. Nevertheless, Priscilla and Aquile (a married couple and note that Priscilla the wife is always mentioned

first by Paul, lived, worked, and traveled with the Paul, who described them as his "fellow workers in Christ Jesus" in his letter to the Romans (16.3). Paul also described Phoebe in Romans as a deacon in the church, not a deaconess as it is sometimes mistranslated, but as a deacon, using the exact same word as he used for the other male deacons, like Stephen (16.1-2). Paul also refers to a certain woman named Junia as being "outstanding among the apostles" (Rom. 16.7). Now describing a woman as an apostle was more than subsequent scribes and translators could handle, and her name was often altered later so as to suggest that she was a male. Junia had become Junio, or Junius or Junianus, in later transcriptions in the Middle Ages.

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (1.11), there is a group of Christians who meet at the house of Chloe, just as the mother of John Mark held house meetings for the earliest Christians in the upper room of her home in Jerusalem (Acts 12.12). Nympha also lead the church in her house in Laodicea, according to Paul (Col. 4.15). In Philippians, Paul refers to two women, Euodia and Syntyche as his 'co-workers' (Phil. 4.2). And Apphia, as a leader of the church in her house, is mentioned in Paul's letter to Philemon (1.2).

So, we really shouldn't be surprised that Paul and Silas and Timothy are welcomed into the house of Lydia, the seller of purple, or that they formed a house church there, which became one of the most important congregations of the early church; the group of Christians to whom Paul's letter to the Philippians is later addressed. What surprises us are those verses in latter works attributed to Paul that do not recognize women as equal co-workers for the Gospel. Do the more conservative statements in the latter letters of St. Paul suggest that he changed his mind about the place of women in the church over time, or that we have misinterpreted those earlier remarks, or that some later writers simply attributed their letters in the name of Paul, letters which reflect a moderation of his position as time wore on?

Women have from the very start of Christianity been an essential part, though they often went unnamed or unnoticed in the Scriptures and through the centuries, as we sadly continue even to this day to struggle to fulfill Paul's vision of a Christian Church where there is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of us are meant to be one in Christ Jesus, our Lord. AMEN.