

Pastor Jon's Sermon from May 25, 2025, based on Acts 16:11-15

“Who is Lydia?”

A few years ago, I took part in a grant funded cohort group called Leading Faithful Innovation through Luther Seminary and the Lilly Foundation. Several Wisconsin and Upper Michigan clergy were invited by our Bishop's offices into the 1-year process to make innovative changes in the church. One of the things we were charged to do was to create experiments in the congregation to find new ways to connect people and address their deepest longings and losses. My first experiment was to start Coffee Talks with Pastor Jon at Shellatte's in Neenah. I wanted to meet people off-site, in a setting where anyone could feel comfortable, where we could chat and discuss life and theology in a way that made sense. Each week I presented a question to the group ahead of time to come and discuss. We started small, but now we have had up to 17 people crammed in the little room off the Barista bar. The first question I started with was, “What keeps you up at night?” Think about that. What keeps you up at night? What do you worry about in the middle of the night? That's the exact space the church needs to engage with its people.

If the church can address this question for people who come and worship or take part in any of the church activities, then we will continue to thrive into the future and be a vital community in people's lives. If we are just worried about paying the bills and preserving the institution, then we will likely fail. The church has to be relevant in people's lives and give them a word of hope, or grace in the sacraments, or a community that walks with them when they most need it. I feel we are doing a pretty good job here, but there is always room for improvement. I don't believe the build it and they will come mentality the best way to do church in the world today... where we expect people to come and find us. Most of our lives as Christians is lived outside of the church walls. Then through your witness and relationship, people might want to come and see.

The central text in our Faithful Innovation cohort was the Lydia text we had today in our first lesson from Acts 16. Lydia, by today's standards, might be considered spiritual but not religious. She has leanings toward God, but she wasn't a part any religious institution. Like many today, she could have felt excluded by organized religion because of her work or social status, or she could have been hurt by religion, or felt that the message being shared in church wasn't for her. But she clearly longed for communion with others. So on the sabbath she went down to the river to pray.

Lydia was an independent, business woman, a dealer in purple cloth. Scholars believe she was a non-Jew, a Gentile, who was sympathetic to Judaism. Dealing in purple cloth meant she dealt with the elite. Purple was the color of royalty. Also, the purple dye came from shellfish, so Lydia would have been considered unclean by Jewish standards. So here she had interest in God and Judaism but was excluded because she was unclean.

The Apostle Paul was called in a vision at night to go to Macedonia, modern day Greece, to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ to them. He set sail and landed in the city of Neapolis in Philippi... the place where the Philippian church was started. He remained in the city for some days. Then on the sabbath he went down by the river to the supposed place of prayer. It said he sat down and spoke to the women who gathered there. Just having conversations with people and listening to them is a way to do ministry. Good work on Paul's part here.

Notice, this took place outside a church or synagogue. Paul went to where people already were gathering on the sabbath. There he met Lydia. Luke, the writer of Luke/Acts said that the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

Paul's words about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection struck a chord with her. Whatever things she experienced in her life, good or bad, this message of Jesus changed her heart. She must have felt a sense of belonging when she heard about Jesus. She and her household were

immediately baptized, and she invited Paul and his companions to stay with her. By Paul accepting her invitation, Paul saw her as a legitimate follower of Jesus and a member of the community. In fact, Lydia was instrumental in starting the Philippian house church.

Whatever Lydia felt and heard that day is for us too. In Christ, you are never alone. In Christ you are accepted as is. In Christ, you don't have to earn God's love for you, it is freely given on the cross. In Christ all manners of people are included, especially those excluded in society. And in Christ, your past doesn't define your future. There is nothing that you have done or left undone that cannot be forgiven and released by God. In Christ we are a new creation.

Imagine how Lydia must have felt to be fully included in a community of faith. Her response was to get up and offer hospitality to the Christian missionaries. How does Christ change your heart? How are you being called to serve?

May Christ's church, the body of Christ in the world today, address all people's deepest longings and losses in a way that offers hope and new life. Amen.