

Reclaiming an Inclusive Church: Extending Radical Hospitality
Acts 16: 9-17
May 13, 2007

Happy Mother's Day to all. Let us celebrate some of the lessons, their gifts to us, taught to us by our mothers.

First, Logic:

"Because I said so, that's why."

Foresight:

"Make sure you wear clean underwear, in case you're in an accident."

Stamina:

"You'll sit there until all that spinach is gone."

Weather:

"This room of yours looks as if a tornado went through it."

Behavior Modification:

"Stop acting like your father!"

Anticipation:

"Just wait until we get home."

Receiving:

"You are going to get it when you get home!"

Medical Science:

"If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they are going to get stuck that way."

Genetics:

"You're just like your father."

Justice:

"One day you'll have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you"

Of course not all of us had these wonderful lessons or gifts of a loving mother. I must give thanks for my mother and her wonderful gift of hospitality, expressed in her homemaking ability. My mom is a remarkable homemaker. She has probably lived in fifteen houses since my birth and she has made every one of them a masterpiece of design, color and order. Each decision she would make was like a brushstroke upon a canvass. Not only that but she kept everything immaculately clean. With two boys in the house that is nothing short of a miracle and I give her thanks for that. She also has this extraverted personality with which she has never met a stranger and can find humor in

the most unlikely of circumstances. She was for me an embodiment of hospitality as I was growing up. What does or did your mother embody?

As you reflect on that question, I want to reflect this morning on our text from Acts and my ongoing series during Eastertide I have entitled, *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*. Our text features an intriguing woman, Lydia, who possesses the gift of hospitality, radical (meaning to the “root”) hospitality really and how it changed the course of Paul’s mission to the gentile world.

As we launch into the vision that Paul had that caused him to head to Macedonia, in the scenes right before this one, we see Paul and his followers imprisoned and tortured. We see God blocking his path into Asia Minor and then this vision from a certain Macedonian. William Barclay believes that Paul’s thorn in the flesh had flared up in his journeys and it made him unable to travel. Luke, the physician, treats him for this affliction. As our narrator Luke turns his pronoun to “we” heading into Macedonia, he has suddenly joined Paul’s evangelism team. They head across water and land to arrive at Philippi, one of the largest cities in Macedonia. Macedonia is the area of the modern-day Baltic States. King Phillip of Macedonia founded Philippi. And who was Phillip’s very famous son. That’s right, Alexander the Great, perhaps the greatest conqueror in the history of the western world. Alexander was a gay man, by the way. Alexander’s vision was to unite the east and west in a single government and culture. And when he died at the age of 33 he was on the way to doing it. So here Paul and his followers are headed across the Aegean into Europe for the first time. Who was this certain man in his dream that beckons him to help the people of Macedonia? Barclay believed it was Alexander

himself! That certainly puts a shift in power and reconciliation between gay and straight people, does it not?

So Paul, Silas, and Luke and their followers continue to obey Christ by taking the gospel to the remotest parts of the western world. Philippi was a Roman colony and a primarily a military city. There was a very small Jewish community. In fact it was so small that they had no synagogue in town. So when these evangelists come to town they have no place to go pray. They are literally homeless and without a religious building to congregate. Now understand how Paul operated. He was a street preacher without a pastoral appointment. He had no salary or credentials. By profession he was a tent-maker. So he would set up shop, fund living quarters and a trade post, and then begin to voluntarily share the good news. It was a tough life. Immediately Paul heads to a place down by the river, at the city gate and attracts a gathering of women. He's preaching not only at the margins of town but also at the margins of ancient society. So for his first worship service at this seed church, Lydia is singled out among these women who became his first-time guests. Now Lydia was a merchant. Lydia was in the purple dye business. Purple dye was extracted at great expense from a certain shellfish at a cost of \$500 a pound of wool at today's prices. That's pricey stuff. She must have had deep pockets to finance this business. Lydia is also a strong presence in her own home. As she hears the gospel preached her heart is warmed. And listen to her response: "If you judge me to be a true believer, come stay at my home." Notice she didn't check with her husband first. She was the spiritual leader in her home and had her entire household baptized. And she showed such a hospitable spirit that she prevailed upon Paul. Reflect

on her attitude for a moment: She was so humble and generous at the same time that she opened up her house as the home base of this team of Apostles.

As I thought about Paul and this invitation, I can't help but think of the psalmist of the 23rd psalm who says, "My cup runneth over." Do you know the legend behind that line? In ancient times when a wealthy prince would have a party they were weeklong affairs. As you would be invited to and attend these parties, as you were enjoying your cup of wine, a wine steward would come by to refill your cup. If he refilled it only halfway, it was subtle way of asking you to leave at the end of the day. If your cup was filled all the way, you were being asked to stay the rest of the week for all the festivities. If the wine steward filled your cup to overflowing, you were being asked to stay indefinitely. That is the attitude of Lydia. She was not asking Paul to stay with her for the weekend. They were to be long-term guests.

So what was the impact of Lydia's radical hospitality? Paul was freed from making and hawking tents for the duration of his Philippian mission making. He could be focused full time on making disciples of Jesus Christ. I can only imagine how effective that made him and his team in their work. Philippi was a special church to Paul. His letter to the Philippians that we have in our Bible is often called an "ode to joy." In so many of Paul's letters he has to fuss at the church, but not at Philippi. It is the love letter that we see an overflowing of love and encouragement. Try these verses on for size: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than yourself." "God, who has started a good work in you, will certainly bring it to completion." "And the peace of Christ, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." These are

some of the greatest love language shared by Paul with one of his churches. If you are ever down or sad, my advice is for you to read Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is a source of constant encouragement. It is even more amazing in its tone when you consider that Paul wrote it from chains in a Roman prison, probably waiting for the fulfillment of a death sentence.

To me there is always a linkage between hospitality and evangelism, between welcoming people and inviting people to join in a community of faith. I singled out Mary Parker a couple of weeks ago in my reflections about the service of Dorcas. Today I want to single out Esther Houser. Esther is my Lydia. Esther is filled with the gift of hospitality. Esther not only loves to entertain and welcome people but she does it from the root of her being – that's radical hospitality. When we have RMN guests in Houston from out of town, Esther is the perfect hostess. When RMN needed seed funding to make key hires for preparing for General Conference in 2008, Esther has led the way in spreading the good news of reconciliation. That for me is the creative and organic combination of hospitality and evangelism. Esther I thank you for who you are.

So how are we doing as a church in extending radical hospitality? You be the judge on that. I am very proud of the progress made by Michael Rutledge and our team devoted to greeting, inviting, and welcoming guests in our midst. They greet, hand out literature, and write hand-written welcome notes to every first-time guest who fills out our attendance pad. But this team is only a few people. All of you may not have the gift of hospitality but you do have a role in welcoming, greeting and extending hospitality and telling the good news of Christ's love here at Bering Memorial UMC.

Consider again the example of Lydia. I can hear the echo of Jesus' words from the 25th Chapter of Matthew echoing in her example. Jesus said to the disciples, "When did you invite me, the stranger, into your house?" For when we do that for the least of these, you serve Christ. This is God's house at 1440 Mulberry. In every action we take toward one who comes into our house for the first time, may we truly overflow her cup so that she knows that not only do we want her for a day or for a season, but for the rest of her life.