

“The Conversion of ‘Who’”

Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Today’s reading in your pew bible is entitled “The Conversion of Lydia.” But who is Lydia? And why is her conversion important: not only in the history of the Church, but for you and me?

Pretend for a moment that you are not looking at me in church, but at the Big Screen in an epic movie. The Apostles Paul and Barnabas had a church fight: Acts 15:39 says “The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company.” The reasons are not germane to this sermon and are a great commercial for attending Bible study. The point is that Paul chose new companions, Silas and Timothy, and launched his second missionary journey. Intending to go to Bithynia, in what is today northeast Turkey, he was thwarted by (according to Acts 16:7) the “Spirit of Jesus.” So they turned left instead of right and went to the port city of Troas. That’s where we enter today’s reading from Acts.

Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia pleading “Come over and help us.” So they turned left again, set sail across the northern Aegean Sea and the Gospel of Jesus Christ—until now only in the eastern Mediterranean and modern day Turkey—first enters Europe. They sailed to the island of Samothrace and then to Neapolis, the port city for Philippi, a Roman colony on Greek soil. Philippi enjoyed immunity from imperial tribute, self-government, and the rights of Italian citizens. Paul’s group “remained in this city for some days” (16:12b) and one wonders exactly who Paul envisioned needing help! Why would this Roman colony need Jewish religion from a traveling preacher?

Then they went to a place of prayer by the river on the Sabbath day. From ancient times Jews would gather at the river when there was no synagogue (Ps. 137). It barely qualified as a place of prayer. The text implies that there were few or no men; certainly not a *minyan*, the ten men required for religious obligations. But there was a woman named Lydia, and it is to her that we turn.

What we know about Lydia is that she was a Gentile from the city of Thyatira. She was a worshipper of God, which means that although a Gentile she sought God in Jewish community. She was also a business-woman: “a dealer in purple cloth.” This was no small thing. Purple cloth was a luxury, not a necessity. Scholars disagree about whether Lydia was a widow. But despite the fact that women of the day had little standing, she was clearly the head of the household: when her heart was opened to the Lord, she and her family was baptized. In those days, convert the head of the household and the family followed. The conversion of who? Lydia, the first conversion in Europe, that’s who!

That got me to thinking about our business men and women. By the standards of the world, business people who make it are viewed as “successful” and having “arrived.” Why would they need God? Why would they choose to be Christian?

Individuals may answer this differently but I reached three of our business people with these questions and for permission to share their responses. Nancy Bennett of Milford Boat Works (www.milfordboatworks.com) noted *“Faith and business are not mutually exclusive. Besides that, the church chose me before I chose the church or business. I consider myself a Christian first and a business person second: which is very helpful when I am dealing with others who do not see it the same way.”*

Chris Carvath of Chris Carvath, LLC (www.carvathlaw.com) said, *“As an attorney, my faith is a balance to the pressures of business where people are sometimes screaming at each other. It reminds me a little of Jesus moderating between factions like an early general practice attorney. I grew up in the church so it has always been part of me. My faith is always why I do volunteer work, even though it takes time away from business. But it is seeing others benefit in a different way.”*

Chris is not here today because he and his wife Kim are at a March of Dimes “March for Babies” event at Lake Quassy. Of that he noted, *“Kim’s sister Michelle gave birth to twins nearly ten years ago. Charlotte lived, John did not. As someone who has also lost a child,*

participating in the fund-raiser in honor of Charlotte and in memory of John is redemptive. It takes suffering and uses it for good.”

Maria Macri of River Crest Farm (www.rivercrestfarm.com) says *“My husband [Andy] suggests that I was a Christian first and then chose a career that fit in with my existing beliefs (being a good steward of God’s creation [and] helping people to grow healthy food. I guess that’s true.*

“But I also think that we make decisions every day to follow Jesus, or not. The main reason I belong to the Church is Jesus: with the Church, I think I would probably get focused on worldly values like success and profit, and go off the deep end. We have a pretty good farm, and there is a temptation to make it into a kind of idol. At Church I become aware that my farm is not the center of the universe, and that other people have valuable missions, and that we are following Jesus and He is the focus.

“Also, in my work I deal with a lot of people. Most of them are really nice. Some of them are ‘high-maintenance’I am an introvert by nature and talking all day long to strangers wears me out by the end of the day. I can get a little snappish with Andy...going to church and ‘Disciple’ class is a time to recharge, be with other Christians who are also struggling along in the world, and think about what God requires...

“Also, forgiveness! I make all kinds of mistakes and have various faults. Growing a nice field of organic garlic doesn’t make me feel any better about my sins. I need Church for that.”

The conversion of who? The conversion of you! And me! Not just Lydia and Nancy and Chris and Maria but all of us. The good news of Jesus Christ is always personal: this is my body, broken for YOU. This is my blood, shed for YOU. Jesus invites and waits for YOU!

As Nancy Bennett and I concluded our chat she said, *“I have a short poem that I keep on my desk to remind me of the way I want to live.”* It is attributed to Mother Theresa but is likely adapted from a writing of Dr. Kent Keith, circulated under the title, “Do It Anyway:”

“DO IT ANYWAY”

People are often unreasonable, irrational and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win
some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.
Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.
Be sincere and honest anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.

Give the best you have and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.