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Acts 16:9-15
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Hudson

“Opening Hearts”

Introduction: Paul, Silas and Timothy are on a mission trip – to the area of the world we call Turkey. They called it Asia Minor. They have been visiting communities where Christians have been gathered – and upon reaching the westernmost area, they are stopped in their efforts by the Holy Spirit who told them not to proceed that way (Acts 16:6, 7). Once they reached the port city of Troas, they are given the green light to proceed when Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia seeking their help and inviting them to “come over”. So they cross the NE section of the Aegean Sea for Macedonia in what is a classic cliché of God closing one door and opening another. For it is in the opening of Paul’s way into Macedonia that he arrives in Philippi, a Greek area, occupied as a Roman colony outpost for soldiers – a city that became for Paul his most beloved of cities and people – a place he looked back upon with fond and loving memories. It is in Philippi in today’s lesson when he meets Lydia.

[Read: Acts 16:9-15]

Lydia – the only place in scripture where we encounter Lydia is right here in these verses. We wouldn’t give a second thought to a woman like Lydia today – but back then she was a historical anomaly. She’s from the city of Thyatira, she’s an entrepreneur in her own right – running a fabric shop that sells purple cloth, and she’s a worshipper of God. We don’t know how she’s come to own her own store – [perhaps her husband died and left her with young children to care for, and with her family, all being back in Thyatira, she wanted to keep the business going until she could pass it along to the children?] She would, indeed, have been a wealthy woman. The area of Thyatira was known for its fabric dyeing and shipping to all parts of the world. To open a shop in Philippi would have been a great marketing move, because the Romans loved purple goods. Purple was a royal color – and very expensive. The true purple dye was gathered – drop by drop from a certain shell fish and therefore costly enough that only the very wealthy could afford it. Often a soldier could only buy a simple strip of it that he sewed to his uniform. But the wealthiest land owners and royalty could buy it by the bolt and would even put purple on their children’s clothing. Sure, there were cheap imitation purples – but the true purple set you apart as special.

Though wealthy and an entrepreneur, Lydia was also a spiritual woman who gathered at the river on the Sabbath with other women of God. These were not the Roman and Greek gods they prayed to, but it was the God of the Hebrew people who so intrigued these non-Jewish women. To pray to the God of creation – the only and all powerful Jehovah would have again been unusual for a woman of Lydia’s stature. So now we know two things that set Lydia apart: she’s a wealthy business woman and a woman who prays to the God Yahweh, Jehovah, the God of creation.

One day as she is down by the riverside in prayer, when Paul and his companions Luke, Timothy and Silas show up and share with the women about the God who came to the world as a baby, lived, healed, and taught in Palestine; was crucified by the Romans, and lived again. Paul tells her that he had been an enemy of the Christians – but now was their chief missionary

starting churches in Asia Minor. It was a gripping and compelling story to Lydia. The message so intrigued her that we are told, “The Lord opened her heart to eagerly hear what Paul was saying.” – And she believed. And she was baptized – she and her household. Her first act of gratitude to God’s grace was to invite Paul and his mission team to headquarter at her home. Her first response as a new Christian was hospitality.

What was Lydia’s motivation? By all appearances Lydia was a successful woman – financially secure, with a business of her own and a home large enough to open to others. Lydia is connected to the rich and famous. We know who opened her heart to hear the message of Christ. Scripture clearly says, the Lord opened her heart. But why was she so receptive to Paul’s message? Why had she sought a place of prayer – down by the riverside? Think about who or what has been the catalyst in your life for your heart being opened.

My dear mother grew up in a strong Christian home in Indiana – attending Westminster Presbyterian Church every Sunday morning and evening. It was the 1920s and 30s and the preacher was what we often refer to as ‘hell fire and brimstone’. Mom went to church because she was taken – but she stayed out of fear. Day by day it was drummed into her that for those who turned their backs on the Lord there awaited an everlasting fire of pain and agony – in hell. Week after week she sat between her parents (she was an only child) certain that to not be there would incur a large black mark next to her name in the book of life. What not to do and how not to behave were her constant companions. God was scary – and not following God’s rules was even scarier.

[In her Sunday school there was also a handsome little ornery boy with wavy blond hair and blue eyes – when the two were teenagers, they would drive the church bus around to pick up the neighborhood children, clean them up and get them dressed, and bring them to Sunday school. Quite a few years later the two teens, became my parents].

Clearly their motivation for all the good deeds they did was fear. Fear brought them back week after week. When my parents first married and moved to a new community and found a church home, the pastor told them their faith was deep and their knowledge of scripture strong and their desire to serve admirable – but their motivation was misguided. God’s grace and love would draw them in and open their hearts; but God’s presence was not to be feared. It was to be expected, it was to be freeing. And their opened hearts eagerly accepted this message of God as a caring, loving parent. As they began to let loose of their fear-based faith, they no longer attended church to try to keep God happy and earn points with God - but now instead, to have the love of God breathed into them each week as they worshipped. And it was thus that they raised their two children – in an atmosphere of love and grace.

I think that’s what happened to Lydia. Paul spoke the words of God’s grace through Jesus, God opened Lydia’s hearts and she heard Paul’s message of acceptance. It begs the question of our own hearts being opened to God’s message of love and mercy, grace and joy. We could lay awake in the night in a cold sweat of fear; terrified that we are lost, forgotten, broken and destitute. Fear of failure, fear of dependency, fear of catastrophe, fear of just about anything and everything that goes bump in the night. A spirit of fear can paralyze us. It’s a fear that holds us back, closes us off to the good news of God’s love and grace – so that we

are too afraid to risk and move ahead. But Lydia opened doors to new opportunities, Lydia heard and accepted and opened her home to news of God's presence. She was not afraid.

On this Mother's Day, I wonder how many of us hold fast to our fears: fear for our children, fear that we're not doing something right, fear that God might not like us enough if we do it wrong. Fear of our parents growing old and becoming dependent, fears – not unfounded, but truly fears that can hold us back from the good news of God's presence – trust.

A couple of weeks ago I e-mailed my 2 adult children with an assignment. *Dear children of mine, would you give some thought to some Mom Hall of Fame memories you have. Moments when mom did something really silly, or really great, or really stupid, or otherwise memorable.* It was fun to read their responses.... and they included some memories that I'd rather not share in a sermon....

But it was fun to think back – and see that some of our biggest goofs are survivable.

[Jon wrote] Mom, remember when you made me wear that stupid shirt/tie and sweater to school for my 1st grade picture. I was so mad I cried all the way to school and refused to smile in the picture...I felt like such a nerd. Remember how you'd wake up on a Saturday morning to find boys all over the family room floor, dirty plates and glasses all over the place and the fridge empty!

[Annie wrote] Mom, remember who we got the giggles going through the drive-thru window at Taco Bell and had to just flee the scene because we were laughing so hard we couldn't even order.

Mom, whenever I need comfort I get an image of your face. Although the image has changed over the years, I can still recall certain moments – the sheer joy when you saw my children, an instant before they were placed in my arms for the first time.

Mom, remember how you didn't even bat an eye when I became president of the Black Student Alliance in High School....you taught me openness and diversity – and I'm glad to have you as a wonderful example, Mom, I know you would deny this, but you believe everyone is entitled to their opinion, as long as they remember, yours is right.

These little vignettes (and some other rather sentimental ones) are coupled with lots of painful memories, really tough periods of time....that just don't need to be shared in a morning sermon because the sermon isn't about my family – it's about your family. The truth is, there are many reasons why Mothers Day is not a joyous occasion....and it would be hypocritical not to acknowledge the pain of this day for many. But in the best parts of parenting, there is grace and warmth, not the fear and pain – and those are the places where Lydia's heart was opened that day at the river, she heard the message of God's love and grace through Paul. As we share God's message with our children, as we recall who has been that vehicle for God's grace in our lives, we give thanks for whoever those people were. The lesson today says, Lydia and her household were baptized and she opened her house in hospitality and generosity.

Let us open our hearts to hear God's message – not in fear, but in hope and love.
Blessings to all parents, Amen