

WOMEN WHO LEAD

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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Acts 16:9-15

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we 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 a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. 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.



Last Sunday, we talked about the necessity of change in order for the early church to fully respond to God's call of love and inclusion in the world.

This week, we read about Lydia, who is Paul's first convert in Europe. And yes, she is a woman.

In some ways, the inclusion of women is not necessarily a change or something new. We know that Shiphrah and Puah saved newborn Hebrew babies in Egypt. We know that Queen Esther saved her people from genocide in Persia. We know that Deborah was a judge in the times before Israel's monarchy.

And Jesus had women whom he considered disciples - Mary who sat at his feet, listening and learning as disciples would; the women who stayed with him at the cross when most of the male disciples went into hiding; the women who come to the empty tomb to be greeted by surprise; and of course the women who first preached the good news of resurrection.

The twelve disciples are named in The Bible and were all men. But without the presence, the witness, and the courage of women, the church would not exist.

There's not a lot we know about Lydia. We know that she lived in Philippi, that she was a Gentile, that she would attend places of prayer like synagogues, intended for those who were Jewish. We also know that she was spiritual, and that God was already at work in her life even before she met Paul.

Her occupation, which alone is extraordinary because *most* women did not have an occupation outside of the home, was as a dealer of purple cloth. This meant that she had access to those who were elite because only the very wealthy could afford to wear purple.

We don't know exactly how wealthy Lydia herself was. But we do know that she had her own home and that she was beholden to no man. Lydia had the power, the privilege, the property, and the agency to provide hospitality to Paul and his fellow missionaries. And she does.

Paul and Silas make her home their home base while they are in town. And during that time, a little house church grows within the care of Lydia's abode.

This is likely the church to whom the letter to the Philippians that Paul writes, later on in his ministry, is addressed. He greets them by saying, "I thank my God every time I remember you..." (Philippians 1:3). And it is in this letter that he mentions two other women, Euodia and Synthyche, whom we know even less about than Lydia, but who are described as coworkers who have struggled beside Paul (Philippians 4:2).

Now, I will not pretend that there is no misogyny in Paul's letters. There is.

And I will not gloss over how The Bible has been used to subjugate and control women for two thousand years. It absolutely has and still is used that way.

But neither will I pretend that women were not active participants in the church of Jesus Christ since the very start.

Those who would say otherwise are cherry-picking their way through scripture to hold onto power and remain in control.

Now, I'm not saying that I don't have my own "canon within the canon" which means scriptures and verses and books of the Bible that I uphold and turn to more than others.

What I'm saying is that we, in fact, *all* do. All of us, conservative, liberal, progressive, fundamental Christians all have a body of scripture that we use and uphold more than other parts of scripture.

What I can't understand then, is why and how, when we are choosing how to live out our faith, we would choose exclusion, subjugation, domination, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia; instead of the trajectory of inclusion, love, and grace that we so obviously see in Jesus Christ and the early church.

The PC(USA)'s Book of Confessions includes a statement about scripture that says this:

The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless words of human beings, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history, and the cosmos which were then current.

The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. (The Confession of 1967, 9.29)

So can we find misogyny and sexism in scripture? Of course. Because misogyny and sexism were a way of life in Jesus's and Paul's day. Women and girls were barely thought of as more than property.

And let's face it, while progress has been made, misogyny and sexism are still an everyday way of life today. Consider how we are now cutting back access to women's and trans-men's healthcare and reproductive justice. Consider how trans-women are too often the target of violence and murder. Consider how women are still paid 83 cents to every dollar made by a man. And consider what the 45th president was able to say about assaulting women and still got elected into office. Misogyny and sexism are still an everyday way of life today.

There were, however, people who were trying to bring about some more equality, fairness, and justice back in Jesus's day, just as there are people trying to do the same today.

And none of us gets it right 100% of the time. In fact, we know that Paul didn't get it right 100% of the time either.

In Philippi, something about the Spirit of God at work in him and in Lydia, and later in Euodia and Syntyche, allowed Paul to see and treat women as nearly equals. But other instances show him doing and saying otherwise.

Given both these stories about Paul that are included in scripture, how then should we interpret scripture?

Jordan Harrell who is actively deconstructing and reconstructing her faith puts it like this:

Genocide is biblical.

Loving your enemy is biblical.

But only one is Christlike.

Slavery is biblical.

Chainbreaking is biblical.

But only one is Christlike.

Patriarchy is biblical.

Counter-cultural elevation of women is biblical.

But only one is Christlike.

Retributive violence is biblical.

Grace-filled restoration is biblical.

But only one is Christlike.

Segregation is biblical.

Unity is biblical.

But only one is Christlike.

You see, when we talk about "what is biblical" there is a whole range of things that are included in that statement because the Bible was written by at least 40 different people who were rich & poor, kings & priests, prophets & fisher folk, and it was written over the span of 1600 years!

Was it all inspired by God? Yes.

But The Confession of 1967 which I quoted from earlier also reminds us that:

The one sufficient revelation of God is Jesus Christ, the Word of God incarnate (capital W), to whom the Holy Spirit bears unique and authoritative witness through the Holy Scriptures, which are received and obeyed as the word of God written (lower case w.) (The Confession of 1967, 9.27).

So there is the Word of God incarnate in Jesus. And there is the word of God written, The Bible. We are called ultimately to be like Christ who is the Word of God made flesh.

Last week, we talked about how Jesus interpreted scripture. Jesus chose to use the hermeneutic of love, placing these two commandments above all the others: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And You shall love your neighbor as yourself," (Matthew 22:37-40).

Using the lens of Jesus, then, why shouldn't women lead? Why wouldn't they be included and welcomed and invited to preach and teach? And how on earth are we debating this still today?

In my tenure here at Calvary, we have received website "inquiries" that challenge women's ordination. One such email read:

Have any of you ever read God's Word? Have you ever studied it? Where does it say woman* can be pastors in the church? Where does it say they can have that type of role in the church? In fact it says the opposite ... If you are not going to follow God's word, then what kind of a church are you?

Well, none of us thought this internet troll deserved our time or an answer.

But we're the kind of church that doesn't leave out accounts of women who lead in scripture. We're the kind of church that doesn't conveniently forget about the Marys and the Lydias and the many unnamed women who shaped Jesus's ministry. We're the kind of church that recognizes that The Bible says things that we now find rather problematic, and we wrestle with those passages and ultimately choose a hermeneutic of love, of equality, of grace, and for the flourishing of *all* humankind.

Remember, we are allowed to change; we are supposed to change. As long as we are led by love, filled with love, and live in love, change is the way.

Maya Angelou once wrote, "Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better."

We know better now. We know that God calls women and men and all people to ministry, regardless of sex, sexuality, or gender. We know better, so we commit to do better.

So I wonder when's the first time you witnessed a woman preach? Maybe it's always been a part of your life.

It sure wasn't a regular part of mine. It wasn't until I was sixteen that I first saw a woman preach. And it was for the occasion of my youth pastor's ordination, so a one-time event.

It was the Rev. Mary Paik, who once served as my youth pastor's youth pastor. I would come to know Mary much more personally in seminary when she served as McCormick's Vice President of Student Affairs. But that Sunday, she was a stranger, a woman I didn't know, preaching from the pulpit. It is still to this day, one of my core memories. I will never forget it.

I'm heartened, though, that my own children are experiencing a different kind of church. My oldest child Austin, when he was just four or five met my youth pastor Shawn. I still claim Shawn as my pastor. So when I introduced them, I told Austin, "This is my pastor."

And Austin responded, "What?! He's a pastor? But he's a boy. Boys can be pastors, too?"

What a world he is living in!

You see, the truth is, I grappled with the ordination of women until my middle year in seminary which as in 2006. That's how powerful bad theology can be.

It sticks with you. It limits and confines you. It makes you doubt God's call on your life.

But theology rooted in love and justice is freeing and leads to abundant life.

So when you read and hear scripture, will you choose the parts that exclude and dehumanize or will you lift up the parts that include and embrace and move the needle just a little bit more towards a more fair and just world?

Since September, the Women of Calvary Bible Study has been learning about the women listed in Matthew's Genealogy of Jesus. We just wrapped up our final session on Thursday.

In a patriarchal society, women were not ordinarily named in genealogies. But here we have five women lifted up in the family line of Jesus. They were deemed so important, that they had to be included: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba, and Mary. They were a prostitute, one who pretended to be a prostitute, a foreigner, a survivor of sexual assault, and a pregnant, unwed teenager.

I guess they were right that "well-behaved women seldom make history."

These women could have brought deep scandal, but instead they are all included in Jesus's family tree! What do these foremothers teach us today? How can we learn and grow from this great cloud of female witnesses?

I hope that after this morning, you will continue to explore and learn *about* and learn *from* the women in the Bible. But here are a few things from Lydia, and Mary, and Ruth, and Esther and many other women from scripture that we can take with us today:

First, God often uses those whom others discount and disregard. That person we would least expect? That's probably whom God has chosen. You see, women were not supposed to have a voice or a place in the public sphere. They were not expected to speak with men outside of their own homes, so when women speak with Jesus, when Paul says "(Lydia) prevailed upon us," these are unexpected developments where women are chosen by God to further the good news of the gospel.

Second, sometimes simply surviving, in times that are meant to destroy you, is enough. I don't know how Lydia became a dealer of purple cloths or gained so much independence as a woman, but I'm quite certain there must have been some great tragedies in her life to have ended up where she did. She chose to survive. She chose to keep going and stay afloat. And it made all the difference. Same goes for Ruth, and Tamar and Mary the mother of Jesus - all who faced an impossible future, but their strength to survive, made it possible for Jesus to be born. So if all you're doing today is surviving, maybe that's plenty for today.

And finally, God trusts women. God trusted Esther to save her people from the King of Persia. God trusted midwives to save God's people from Pharaoh. God trusted Ruth to care for Naomi. God trusted Mary to care for Jesus. God trusted women with the gospel message of new life. God trusts women. So maybe we should, too.

Today, I give thanks for Lydia and all the women who have come before us who have shown us how to be faithful disciples of Jesus.

So let us go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God, Amen.