

Learning from the Restless Heart—Acts 16: 1-15

6th Sunday in Easter—May 6, 2018

Lydia would have been right at home in the United Church I think. There are many women like Lydia in the UCC. Women with a restless energy, doers, leaders, organizers, seekers. In fact here is a bit of trivia for you, Lydia is the first European to embrace Christianity in the New Testament. In other words, Lydia is the mother of the western Christian church. A fact that is hardly ever acknowledged. She is a very interesting woman this Lydia. She is one of the few women in the bible that appears on her own merits. In other words, she doesn't appear because she is somebody's wife, daughter or servant; she is simply Lydia.

Even by our 21st century western standards, Lydia is a liberated woman. She was a successful businessperson who owned her own home. She is a "dealer in purple cloth". Purple cloth was destined for the rich and royal in the Roman world, where it symbolized power and influence. A merchant in purple cloth was someone who rubbed shoulders with society's rich and famous. Yet all this isn't enough for her. The author of Acts is ambiguous about her religious identity, but it seems likely that she was a Gentile attracted to Jewish ways and practices, of which there were many in ancient times. It appears that Lydia may be liberated but she is not fulfilled, today we might call her a seeker. Lydia is looking for something more in her life.

As I reflected on this 2,000-year-old story of Lydia I found it astonishing how directly it parallels the experience of so many women in the last 50 to 75 years. It wasn't that long ago that the only way a woman could use her gifts was as a mother, a homemaker, a nurse or perhaps a teacher. Women have fought and continue to fight some tough battles to liberate themselves from the tyranny of such pre-determined and narrowly defined lives. Such that today we see women using their gifts in a variety of fields of work, including motherhood and home management.

Yet, there are those who have discovered that liberation from traditional roles does not always mean fulfillment. Yes, women have been liberated from something, but what have women been liberated for? In many cases, liberation has simply meant buying into the values of the market. Instead of being chained to the home, many women find themselves chained to a lifestyle of working in order to consume. It is now taken for granted, without much thought being given, that a family requires two incomes in order to get by. The reality in some, though not all situations is that two incomes are required to maintain lifestyles that are promoted by advertisers who sell us dissatisfaction, fear and obsolescence in order to increase profits.

What many women have found is not liberation but captivity, captivity to busyness, to the stress and pressures of balancing career and family. All this makes for a certain dissatisfaction or restlessness; a yearning among women for something more enduring, more life giving than the simplistic choice between rigid social roles and the false liberation of market values. I think this partly explains the popularity of yoga, Oprah

and her brand of spirituality. What this dissatisfaction shows is that the conflict between traditional and non-traditional roles is a false one. Both are valid, both can be life giving and both can be life denying. The question is this, and it applies to both women and men; are you fulfilled? Let me put it in religious terms; have you been saved? Because that's what fulfillment is really all about isn't it? Have you been saved from the meaninglessness of the market and other false value systems? Have you been saved for love, community and joy? I wonder if questions like these are what drew Lydia down to the river where she encountered Paul. Questions born of a deep dissatisfaction, restlessness and yearning.

It's at the river that she encounters Paul. It's the Jewish Sabbath and Paul goes outside of town to a prayer meeting. Apparently, the Jewish population in Philippi was rather small, there was no synagogue, a synagogue needed at least ten Jewish men in order to be recognized as such. At the river Paul meets a group of women, among them is Lydia. Judaism was Paul's way in with Lydia. There was something in Judaism that attracted Lydia, that made her curious, that gave her the possibility of adding something that was missing.

We don't know the details of what happened, but something was stirred and awakened in Lydia, something that spoke to her restlessness and yearning. A need was answered, a need that was not being met by her outward success. In the words Paul speaks, she senses the presence of something holy and sacred that speaks to the deepest part of her. They evoke a knowing long buried in her bones, a knowing that brings with it the hope of wholeness. What we know is that in Paul's sharing of the hope that Jesus brought into his life, her heart opens and she and her entire household are baptized.

Lydia, the mother of the western Christian church is a great example of trusting that holy restlessness, of letting it lead you to a place where your heart can find rest. Augustine, one of the church fathers famously said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." There is a God-sized hole in us waiting to be filled. God creates the very dissatisfaction that finally only divine grace and love can satisfy.¹ A holy restlessness inside of us will not let us settle for mere success as defined by the values of the world.

The beginning of liberation for women in our society is often characterized by a strong and justifiably righteous urge to prove that 'we too can do it'. The result however is 'successful' women are often defined in terms of the same hierarchies and striving for power over others as men. It's a beginning for sure, but it can't be the end. It leaves women as empty as it has left men. Fulfillment, salvation is not about the love of power, but the power of love—the power of love that abhors systems of domination,

¹ Richard Rohr, "The Search for the Real", Wednesday, December 20, 2017, <https://cac.org/the-search-for-the-real-2017-12-20/>

that sees beyond dualities of gender and race—the power of love that sees the unity, the oneness of creation amidst the many and diverse expressions of God’s grace.²

Like Lydia, the key is to keep seeking, not to become too easily satisfied or comfortable. Keep seeking, don’t settle for the ease of being told what to do with your life, but don’t settle either for the false liberation offered by the market. Fulfillment, salvation lies in our willingness to trust the restlessness, to keep seeking with a humble and willing heart. God, the Universe whatever you want to call the Great Mystery, is still sending messengers who are placed on our path to invite us into the salvation that will calm the restless heart and make us whole.

² Avijit Pathak, “In Search of Spiritually-Enriched Feminism”, *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/gender/in-search-of-spiritually-enriched-feminism>