

Ac 16:11-15, 40
7 August 2011

“Lydian Listening”

Wednesday this past week, the 3rd, was the feast of St. Lydia. She and her household are baptized in our reading from Acts. Also, that day was the twenty-fifth anniversary of my own baptism. That came **one year** after the night in August I mentioned last month in which I had that first powerful experience of God’s love. (It took my mom’s encouragement for me to actually get baptized!)

In fact, I still have the shirt I was wearing when I was baptized. It was the upper half of some blue surgical scrubs. It’s a bit raggedy now, and it has some green stains due to a summer job I had a few years later, painting machines for a factory.

I begin with this talk about baptism, because the story of Lydia—her story of baptism and the change of heart and mind that accompanies it—is a key moment in the early church.

Let’s look at how she fits in. Earlier in chapter 16, the apostle Paul is in Asia Minor, where he has a vision in the night of a Macedonian man who says, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9). So Paul makes his first journey to Europe. He and his friends go to Philippi, where they encounter Lydia and her friends, as we read a few moments ago.

After they part company with Lydia, Paul and his group meet a slave girl who we’re told can predict the future. There is a spirit of divination within her. The girl’s owners use her as a fortune teller, and the biggest fortune is the one they make off her! After a few days of her pointing out that Paul and his friends are “slaves of the Most High God,” the apostle gets irritated and casts the spirit out of her (v. 17).

Seeing that their source of income has been cast to the winds, her owners grab Paul and his friend Silas, stir up the crowd to beat them, and have them tossed into jail. To make a long story short, that night there’s an earthquake which knocks all the doors loose, but Paul and Silas refuse to escape.

In the morning, the magistrates—the local Roman officials—find out that they have illegally ordered the arrest and beating of Roman citizens. Relatively few residents of the empire are citizens. And they do have certain rights. The magistrates want Paul and Silas to get out of town quickly and quietly. (This is the kind of thing that can ruin a political career!) But Paul says, “Are you serious? I’m not moving an inch until they come and **apologize** in front of everyone!”

It’s only **then** that they agree to leave. But they still have one more stop to make. Before taking off, who do they insist on seeing? Lydia—and the young church that is now meeting in her home.

So we come full circle back to this woman whose name has been preserved for us. (That’s a rarity with women in the Bible.)

So who is Lydia? The first thing we learn about her is that Paul meets her at “a place of prayer” on the sabbath (v. 13). That would sound right, since we’re told she’s “a worshiper of God” (v. 14). That’s a term used to describe the so-called “God-fearers.” They were Gentiles who admired the Jewish faith and followed it as best they

could. We're also told she is "a dealer in purple cloth." That's a lucrative trade, so she must have some money.

So what's so remarkable about this godly woman of means? While we're finding out who she is, we also find out what's happening with her. The Good News Bible puts it this way: "One of those who heard us was Lydia...and the Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying." The NRSV says that she "was listening to us" and that the "Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul."

There's a theme of listening. Why is listening so important? Why do we listen? Do we listen?

We listen to go deeper. We listen to go deeper into life, to not stay at the surface of life.

What is the result of Lydia's listening? It's her conversion. True conversion is an ongoing conversion. It's a "conversion [that] involves much more than a moment; it is a process which involves long periods of time...It involves relationships that are woven into [our] life story."¹

Judette Gallares has an essay, "Opening the Heart to Listen: Becoming Mystics and Prophets Today."² She uses Lydia's conversion story to describe how all of us are called to be both mystics (those with a direct, loving experience of God) and prophets (those who address our world with the word from God). We might think of it as the inner and outer life.

Lydia does a very good job of this with her hospitality. There's more to that than serving tea and cookies! "Part of the practice of hospitality during that time was to offer a safe haven for one's guests, especially when there was an immediate possibility of real danger to them." Remember verse 40, when she welcomes Paul and his friends after they're released from prison—on the condition that they get the heck out of Dodge?

It takes a certain depth of spirit, a certain willingness to listen, to demonstrate the courage that Lydia finds.

Gallares frames hospitality in these terms: "In today's fragmented world, which [has] different levels and degrees of homelessness, our mystic spirit, our sense of 'belonging to God' must open us up to others and to the world, to offer ourselves, our communities and our planet earth as a hospitable place for humanity and the whole of God's creation."

We all experience homelessness to a degree, even if we've never been without physical shelter. As humans, we often feel alienated; we feel like aliens, even to ourselves. We feel like we're in a foreign land. We're like Moses: I've been a stranger in a strange land! (Ex 2:22). As Christians, the waters of baptism carry us to our homeland.

Gallares, like Lydia, is well aware of the risks involved. Being from the third world (the Philippines)—as well as being a woman—she understands the dangers of violence and terrorism. Still, she asks the question: "How can we listen with an open heart, willing to understand where the other is coming from? This is the true spirit of hospitality. It is not [removed] when there is danger or differences, but only **at that moment** proves itself to be genuine hospitality."

¹ www.eriebenedictines.org/prioress

² [www.uisg.org/public/Attachments/Plenaria 2010_Judette Gallares .pdf](http://www.uisg.org/public/Attachments/Plenaria%202010_Judette%20Gallares.pdf)

How can we imitate that Lydian listening here, in this church and in our community? Remember, this involves being both mystic and prophet. It involves finding that place within ourselves and within the community, the world around us. It's not either/or; it's both/and.

A few nights ago, I had a dream. Or to be more precise, it was in that in-between land where you're just about to go to sleep, but it **feels** like a dream. Anyway, I seemed to be aware of what I was talking about a moment ago: why we listen. I imagined that I was living on the surface of life and that I needed to go deeper.

I'm reminded of something Thomas Merton wrote in the 1950s. It's in his book, *The Sign of Jonas*, which was a journal he kept during his first years after moving to the monastery in Kentucky. In a prayer that he writes to God, he laments the noisiness he finds within himself. One might say that he recognizes his own living on the surface of life and his need to go deeper.

"You have made my soul for Your peace and Your silence," he says, "but it is lacerated by the noise of my activity and my desires. My mind is crucified all day by its own hunger for experience, for ideas, for satisfaction. And I do not possess my house in silence..."

"I am content that these pages show me to be what I am—noisy, full of the racket of my imperfections and passions, and the wide open wounds left by my sins. Full of my own emptiness. Yet, ruined as my house is, You live there!"³

Ruined as the house that **all** of us are, God lives there.

Hearing these words coming from a monk lets me know: I am not alone in my noise and refusal to listen.

In the last couple of weeks, we've seen the refusal to listen displayed by our Congress. People have been talking **at** each other, but not **with** each other. As a consequence, people have been hurt. It looks like people will **continue** to be hurt. Using myself as an example, I can be so darn convinced that **I'm right** that I wind up doing some pretty terrible things.

So, again I ask, why is listening so important? Why do we listen?

Listening is the posture of faith. Before speaking—before speaking even good words—we must listen. We must listen to hear the call to conversion—the call to baptism—the call to ongoing conversion. We must listen for the word of God. We must listen like Lydia.

³ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953), 47.