

## **“Lessons from Lydia, Tips from Timothy”**

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Based upon Acts 16:11-15; 1 Tim. 4:12-16

Lauren, Caroline, and Louisa: on this joyful day when we finally get to gather together to celebrate your decision to reaffirm your faith in Christ and your commitment to the Church, I am excited to celebrate with you because I know you have worked toward this for a long time. But as Rev. Dottie LaPenta and I explained multiple times over the past months, confirmation is not graduation. You are not done with your journey of faith today, done with learning or serving; you are simply entering a new stage of your discipleship. So, instead of singing your praises, which would be easy for me to do, or offering you wisdom born of my own experience, which might sound like you were graduating, I want to invite you, and of course everyone else here listening today, to prepare for the next leg of your journey of faith by returning with me to the Bible on which our faith is based, to learn from two of the greatest leaders in the early church, Lydia and Timothy, about transitions in faith and discipleship. Although they are not as famous as Peter and Paul, they were exemplary Christians who changed the lives of many in their day, and millions of others since then.

Lydia, as you just heard, was born in Thyatira, in the region of Lydia, which was located in what we would now call Turkey. She was a dealer in purple cloth. In those days, purple dye was so hard and expensive to produce that anything purple was valued like silver. Lydia was in business with rich people, therefore, and may have been well-off herself. We know that she managed her own household and had slaves. This, and the fact that no husband appears in the story, suggests she was either the single daughter of a rich family or a widow. She was a Gentile by birth, but was also what they called back then a “God-fearer,” which meant someone who worshiped Yahweh and was drawn to Judaism but had not yet been officially converted. When Paul met her, she was praying with other God-fearing women by a river outside of the city.

There are lots of things that are interesting about Lydia’s story, starting with the fact that it seems that God really wanted her to hear the Gospel. You see Paul had originally tried to go somewhere else on his missionary journey. First, he wanted to go to Asia. “No dice,” said the Spirit. Then he wanted to go to Mysia. “Uh uh,” the Spirit said. Then Paul had a dream of a man in Macedonia, which was located in what would now be considered the northern half of Greece, telling him to go there. So, he went to Macedonia and ended up in Philippi, the biggest city there. But Philippi didn’t have a synagogue, which is where Paul usually began his ministry. Still trying to figure out what the Spirit wanted him to do, Paul headed down to the river where Jews, if there were any, would have gone to pray. There he found not the man in his dreams, but Lydia, leading prayer with a group of women. Thankfully, this didn’t stop Paul. He preached to Lydia, who thanks to the Spirit was open to the word. She embraced the Gospel and had herself and her whole household baptized. In so doing, she became the first Christian convert in Europe, and a leader in Paul’s favorite church, the Philippian congregation, which met in her home. Lydia also became the main reason why women were allowed to be baptized even after the Church became more patriarchal. If Luke hadn’t recorded her story, by the Middle Ages it is highly likely that someone would have argued that only men could be baptized. Thus, all women today have Lydia (as well as Luke) to thank for the fact that we find ourselves here as baptized, or about to be

baptized, women of faith. Women like me also have Lydia to thank for paving the way for women to be in ministry. When you read about how hard the Spirit worked to get Paul to Lydia, it's hard to refute how badly God wanted to give Lydia that job!

If we look to Lydia as a model of faithfulness, there are many lessons woven into her story:

1) **Do not feel the need to be conformed to the world.** Lydia was a non-conformist. She was a businesswoman and a homeowner at a time when it was not common for women to be either. She was a believer in Yahweh despite the fact that her family and her city were predominantly Gentile. Once Paul told her about Jesus, she became a Christian and a leader in her church, which required her to take still two more steps away from social norms. Lydia listened to God. She didn't worry about fitting in; she worried about knowing and serving the Lord. We would all do well to share her priorities.

2) **Be careful to balance your work and your faith.** It is very tempting and very easy in our crazy-busy world for people to let their faith fall by the wayside as they scramble to meet their responsibilities in school or work or home. But in so doing, they let go the one thing which can give them the strength, the hope, and the direction to cope with the stresses and challenges of life. Although Lydia was a successful businesswoman, she did not allow her work to keep her from her prayer life and faith. She was down by the river, not in the dye factory, when Paul found her, and that made all the difference. Learn from her how to cherish and nurture your faith no matter how busy you are.

3) **Don't forget the Church exists outside the building.** Right now, because of the pandemic, we all have been forced to do church in new ways. We are doing worship from the parking lot today while others worship from their homes. Lydia worshiped by the river because there wasn't a synagogue available to her in the city. In the same way, you should nurture your faith wherever you are. Obviously, we want you to worship here as long as you are able. You are joining Prince of Peace. But when you go to college there may not be a Presbyterian church within walking distance. Practice your faith anyway. Jesus said that wherever two or three were gathered he was there. Wherever he is, is where we want to be.

4) **Be open to the work of the Spirit.** Luke makes very clear in the story that it wasn't Paul's brilliant oratory that made Lydia receive the Gospel and ask to be baptized on the spot. It was the work of God, who apparently wanted Lydia to be in the Church so badly that the Spirit kept changing Paul's plans. But even before she met Paul, we know that Lydia was open to the Spirit, or she wouldn't have been with the Jews and God-fearers that day. Trust that the Spirit is leading you always. Sometimes, like Paul, you will feel that the Spirit is thwarting your plans. Other times, like Lydia, you will feel the Spirit open doors you didn't even know were there. As I said last week, we need to have a growth mindset when it comes to our faith. Being a disciple means committing to a lifetime of learning and growing under the Spirit's direction.

**5) As you are open to the Spirit, be open to sharing with others in hospitality and ministry as well.** The first thing that Lydia did after receiving the Gospel was to share it. She brought the good news to her home, which led to everyone else being baptized along with her. Then she invited Paul and Silas to stay with her, using her gift of hospitality. Later still, after God liberated Paul and Silas from being imprisoned and used them to convert their jailor and his family in the process, she received all of them too. This is how the Church has always worked. God brings together people who otherwise might never cross paths. God blesses them all with gifts and calls them to use them together to care for each other and for others. You are all very gifted and you are here by God's grace. Remember as you move forward not to close the door on others who are different from you, or on your calling to use your gifts to serve God.

Lydia's conversion from Judaism to Christianity marked a big transition on her journey of faith. So does today's letter, *First Timothy*, in a way. Timothy was in many ways, the "Robin" to Paul's "Batman." He was a young guy who was raised in the Christian faith by his mother and his grandmother after they converted. After he crossed paths with Paul, he began traveling with him, learning like an apprentice apostle. But after Paul started getting arrested a lot, Timothy had to venture out on his own to serve as Paul's stand-in, explaining the Gospel, and addressing any problems in the churches he visited. Today's letter describes a time when Timothy was in Ephesus on Paul's behalf. The congregation in Ephesus was having some problems with false teachers and prophets. It was no easy job for Timothy to step in and correct the people there, many of whom were probably his elders. Accordingly, Paul offered him these words of encouragement: "Let no one despise your youth, but set them an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I arrive, give attention to the public reading of scripture, to exhorting, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift that is in you..."

I have always been fond of these words because the first time I was ever ordained— to be a deacon— my pastor at the time "gave me" these words as my charge during that service. I now give them to you because Timothy's circumstances can teach you a lot. Although the words about his "youth" were Paul's, Timothy's successful ministry reminds us that discipleship is not age dependent. **You are never too young to love and serve the Lord, never too young to hear the Spirit, never too young to witness to God's saving grace in Christ.** Keep this in mind. In confirmation you are claiming as your own the baptismal vows, either saying on your own what your parents once said on your behalf or answering those questions yourself for the first time. You have within you all you need to set an example for others in speech and conduct, love, and faith. So, don't feel that you have to wait to be older to do valuable ministry. Dottie and I already know that you have the ability to ask astute questions and to recognize needs in the congregation and the world that need to be met. You are the future of the Church, yes, but you are also the Church now. Embrace that so that now and in the future Christ's teachings will not be lost.

Timothy was able to do what he needed to do well for two reasons. **First, his family raised him solidly in the faith.** You also have been raised in the faith by your families. This is such a gift! Learn from your families how to see the world through the lens of faith, and to build your life on service and generosity as they do. As you grow you may come to have beliefs that differ in some ways from theirs, which is normal and fine. But draw upon their examples and

their wisdom because it's much easier to be a faithful disciple on your own when you have seen people you love do it.

The second thing Timothy had which made him a little different from the rest of the apostles is that he came from a mixed-race family. His mother was born a Jew and his father was a Greek Gentile. That meant that he was raised to know Yahweh, but also to know the Greek philosophers and gods. **You are in a similar position today in the sense that you live in two worlds.** You have grown up in the church, yet you live in a world that increasingly embraces other values and gods and dismisses the relevance of the Church. Previous generations grew up in a different world, when most everyone went to Church, so discipleship was not so counter-cultural. But your world is different. That will present challenges, but it also presents opportunities because you can speak the language of both worlds. Allow your knowledge of what it's like out there, therefore, to help you teach the Church what the world needs and fears, and allow your knowledge of God's goodness, power, and love, gleaned from this community, to equip you to carry God's grace and love out into the world in a way that people out there will understand. Paul said that to be a disciple is to be an ambassador of reconciliation. You are uniquely equipped to do this, to build bridges between the church and the world, bringing people together with love.

Last but not least, a story—this one not from the Scriptures but from the world. There was a missionary to Argentina named Douglass Ruffle, who wrote about an experience he has with a 12-year old named Facundo in the congregation he was serving.<sup>1</sup> He was the son of the church's caretaker, and lived with him in a house behind the church. He was very tall for his age, and very gentle in spirit. One year he was cast to play the inn keeper in a Christmas play that was supposed to begin in the sanctuary and end as a live nativity on the front lawn. Mary rode in on a donkey with Joseph by her side. Facundo stepped out to greet them with the line I know you all know well because you have been in so many pageants yourselves: "There's no room in the inn." But that night, like Lydia, Facundo felt so moved by the Spirit then when he saw the pregnant Mary on the donkey, and heard her respond to his line with a weary and worried: "But we are so tired. Do you know anywhere else we can stay?", that Facundo replied, "You can stay with me in my room." At first the actress playing Mary was stunned and confused. She knew she was supposed to end up on the front lawn in a stable. But then she decided to just go with it. "OK, thanks," she said, and followed Facundo, not to the front yard, but out the back door toward his house. Everyone in the church stood up and applauded because this is the way we all should respond to the story. Facundo had taught them the Gospel in a way they would never forget.

Today we recognize that you have joined the other generations gathered here today in person and in spirit by deciding to offer Christ your room. The Spirit is at work in you as it was in Lydia and Timothy and Facundo, and through you, many will come to understand the incredible love of God in Jesus Christ. I rejoice in this opportunity to journey forward in faith with you, (since none of us has graduated yet!) and know that we all look forward to learning from your example. May the good Lord bless you and keep you now and always. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Animating *Illustrations*, cf. "Discipleship", HOMILETICSONLINE.COM, Sept. 2020; [https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration\\_search.asp?keywords=discipleship&imageField2=](https://www.homileticonline.com/subscriber/illustration_search.asp?keywords=discipleship&imageField2=) (citing Douglas Ruffle, *A Missionary Mindset: What Church Leaders Need to Know to Reach Their Community — Lessons from E. Stanley Jones* (Discipleship Resources, 2016). churchleadership.com.)