

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
May 9, 2010
Acts 16:9-15

“A certain woman named Lydia...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Alison was an athletic young woman. And so I was not surprised when she came to my office at Mount Holyoke College and told me with excitement that she was going to run a marathon in Hartford during the spring of her senior year. Alison was active in the Protestant community on campus, she regularly attended worship services in Abbey Chapel and, as the Protestant Chaplain, I was very proud of her. That winter, we all watched as Alison began training for the spring marathon. It can be quite a challenge to go running outside through a New England winter, but Alison was faithful—on a number of levels—and she maintained her training program running five days out of seven each week to prepare for the marathon.

The day of the marathon Alison and two car-loads of friends drove to Hartford for the race. She was excited, nervous, worried she could not run 26 miles, afraid she would “poop out.” Once in Hartford and milling around with the other runners before the race began, Alison noticed that a number of people had taken magic markers and written their names down their arms. The idea was that bystanders could call out your name as you ran by and give you support. Apparently, the magic markers were being passed around the crowd and when a big black marker came to Alison, she turned to someone and said, “Would you write Alison down both my arms?”

And so with her name written down her arms, Alison ran the marathon and she ran the entire 26 miles. Her goal was simply to finish, she did not care about the time and she finish she did! When Alison returned to campus she told me, “It was amazing. People lined the course the entire 26 miles and they called out MY name and cheered me on. ‘You go Alison!’ ‘You can do it Alison!’ ‘Keep going, Alison, you’re doing great!’” Alison told me, “I am not sure if I could have kept going without those cheers and encouragement. To hear people call MY name was so uplifting, I was determined to keep running!”

Being known by our own name is important. Being seen, recognized and called BY NAME is meaningful in our lives.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the well-known and much-loved Buddhist Monk, teacher, activist and poet, wrote a poem called “Please Call Me By My True Names.” These are the closing lines,

*Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.*

*Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart
can be left open, the door of compassion.*

Being known by name is important and today in our Scripture reading from the Book of Acts we have the rare opportunity to hear a Bible story in which a woman is called by name. She is Lydia from the city of Thyatira. A woman in a Bible story has a name, Halleluiaah! Lydia has an important role in the story, and in fact an important role in history, but so do many other women in the Bible and they are not called by name. Women who have important roles in Biblical stories are usually described by naming who they are related to, or where they are from, or by their work. Listen, you’ll hear how some women in the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament are identified:

Lot’s daughters

Jarius’ daughter

Jephthah’s daughter

Amaziah’s daughters

Lot’s wife

Potiphar’s wife

Job’s wife

Isaiah’s wife

Naaman’s wife

Manoah’s wife

Samson’s mother

Jephthah’s mother

Peter’s mother-in-law

Rebekah’s nurse

Rachel’s midwife

Slave-girl Soothsayer of Philippi

Prostitutes who came before King Solomon with the baby

Samarian woman at the well

The woman with the issue of blood

All important women in Bible stories, none called by their own names. But in today's story in the Book of Acts, it is different. Lydia has a name AND she is identified by her work and the city where she is from!

So who is this Lydia we find in the Book of Acts?

Lydia was from the city of Thyatira, an important commercial center, about 40 miles inland from where the coast of Western Turkey meets the Aegean Sea. The city was famous for its dye trade and textiles—there were wool workers, tanners, linen weavers and dyers. Lydia was a wealthy business woman, a dye merchant—specifically, she sold purple cloth. She was a Gentile, probably pagan, probably Turkish, and probably a widow.

So how is it that Paul met Lydia? One night, Paul had a vision, a dream in which a man pleaded with him to go to Macedonia, the province or territory by the Aegean Sea where Lydia lives. Paul interpreted the dream as a call from God for him to travel to “proclaim the good news to them.” Paul and his companions Silas and Timothy went to Philippi, the leading city in Macedonia and found there were few Jews there and no synagogue. He waited until the Sabbath and then went down by the river where he assumed local Jews might gather in prayer. It was there by the river that he met Lydia. Paul preached by the river and talked with Lydia who, we are told, “opened her heart to listen eagerly.” Lydia really heard Paul, she opened her heart to his message. AND Lydia's life was transformed by that encounter by the river with Paul. She was filled with God's grace and responded to what she heard Paul say by asking that she and her whole household be baptized. Lydia then offered to open her home to Paul, Timothy and Silas and they accepted. Lydia demonstrated the great Christian virtue of hospitality, ministering to the ones who had come to minister to her.

Lydia and her household are remembered to this day as being the first people in Europe known to have been converted to Christianity and baptized. Lydia's home was probably the meeting place of the early Philippian Christians—her home church is believed to be the place that Christianity began and took hold in Europe.

Lydia is important to Christians everywhere because she was the first European Convert and she created an early church in her home. Lydia is especially important to Christian women because she is a female leader in the New Testament who is called by name.

Like Lydia, many Christian women throughout the ages have responded to God's call with generosity, hospitality and commitment, providing energetic support and participation in the mission of the church whenever and however possible.

Lydia evokes the memory of women—our foremothers in faith—who for hundreds of years did not let their marginalization stop them from being powerhouses for good in the life of the church.

Like so many women in Bible stories who are described but not named, women for generations have kept churches running, and running well, but they have not been named, recognized, or honored as they should have been. For generations, women have cooked church suppers, taught Sunday School, pinched pennies to give offering, made altar cloths, baked communion bread, sewn curtains, washed dishes, scrubbed floors, swept hallways, polished silver, ironed communion cloths, and the list goes on but the names of these hard working and faithful women have not always been lifted up and honored. And yet, as with Lydia, there would be no church without them.

Women have been and continue to be the backbone of most Christian Churches. Women who do the daily, unglamorous, underappreciated work of keeping churches alive and humming are often overlooked.

And so today we lift up and are grateful that we find a story in the Bible in which a hard working and visionary woman is named and appreciated. We are grateful that Lydia is named, grateful that in the Book of Acts it actually says: "A certain woman named Lydia...was listening to Paul..."
"A certain woman named Lydia."

Lydia's transformation, her conversion and baptism, her hospitality to Paul and his friends, and her willingness to establish an early church in Philippi right in her home changed history. This is a dramatic story. But the less dramatic stories of church women who have nurtured their own faith communities should also be lifted and known. Those women throughout time and right up to today should be known BY NAME.

Our Haydenville Congregational Church shares some of this history. This church, our beloved church, fell on hard times in the 1990s and early part of this decade. This church got smaller and smaller and it was hard to keep the fuel tank full and the lights on, hard to pay a pastor, hard to keep going. But a small group of women in this church, descendants of Lydia you could say, kept meeting and praying, kept the doors open even when only 15 people came to

church. These women kept believing that their church could experience a resurrection and they maintained this church through lean and difficult times. Those women, like Lydia, should be named and we should thank God for the vision and faith, energy and perseverance, strength and stamina that kept this church open even when it was down to just them...

Beth Howland

Helen Warner

Cora Warner

Norma Kellogg

Esther Warner

Ruth Loomis

Diane Scott

Linda O'Dea

Mae Smith

Nancy Demarais

Trish LaFreniere

Shirley Warner

Phyllis Webb

Gloria Lampron

Ellie Loomis

Cindy McQueston

Sylvia Clark

Viola Fraser

Please call me by my true names, Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up, and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

These are the true names of the women, like Lydia in the Book of Acts, who nurtured a small Christian community, kept fanning the flames so the embers would not go out, kept a faith community alive so its message and its witness could grow and spread. These women are our Lydias, our Haydenville Lydias, who met in the Dining Room when they could not afford to heat the Sanctuary, who raised money to pay the light bill, who typed and printed Sunday Bulletins when they only needed to make 15 copies, who made suppers, hung curtains, held Church Fairs and hosted coffee hour when there were just a few families left in this church.

Their faithful witness reminds me of the World Vision advertisements I see in the clergy journals I read. The ads say, "Don't go to Church. Be the Church."

Our Lydias, the faithful women of the Haydenville Congregational Church, did not just go to church, they were the church.

This church has grown ten-fold since the days when there were 15 people in worship. Thanks be to God. And so when we look around and are grateful that this is a growing and thriving congregation, we are grateful to Lydia of Thyatira who heard the word of God and established a church in her home. And we are we grateful to our Lydias who believed and were faithful, who organized, invited, remained hopeful and kept the doors of this church open and the candles lit. The rest of us, all 100 plus newcomers, should write their names down our arms and run around the Hilltowns singing their praises. Our Lydias must be named. All women who do the quiet, behind-the-scenes hard work to keep a church community alive through good times and hard times should be named and celebrated. Like our sister Lydia, they should be named.

This day we remember “a certain woman named Lydia.” We are grateful for her conversion, her commitment, her hospitality, and her vision.

Because Lydia was the first European convert to Christianity and created an early home church, we a part of her legacy, we share in her baptism, we have inherited her dream, we are part of her witness.

And this day we remember OUR Lydias—we are grateful for their faithfulness, their tenacity, their conviction and their devotion.

And we know that our Lydias, the saints of this church, are reaching to the next generation, nurturing the younger ones, teaching the younger ones, guiding, supporting, encouraging and counseling the rest of us.

This day we lift up the true names of the women heroes in the Bible and in our own Church community.

Blessed be their work.

Blessed be their witness.

Bless be their names.

Amen.