

John 5:1-9

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Bethzatha, which has five porticoes. In these lay many invalids---blind, lame, and paralyzed. One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." Jesus said to him, 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a Sabbath.

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.

"Growing In Love"

Once upon a time there was a little boy who went camping with his family down by the riverside. When they got home, his mother asked him what he liked best about their camping adventure. Without missing a heartbeat he said: "Peeing on the tree and fishing with daddy." John Stuart Mill, the renowned English philosopher/political economist grew into his manhood and family identity in much the same way. At a very early age when he showed a great amount of intellect, his father took him under his wing and taught him things that he practiced in his own profession. But thinking that religious learning was unnecessary and distracting, he chose to keep any religious instruction from his son. What this meant for Mill when he looked back on his youth was that he felt a deep sense of lostness and longing. His mind was full but his soul was 'starved.' Mill likened himself to a 'well equipped ship, but with no sail' (source unknown).

Lydia, the gentile, Western European woman of great intellect in today's Biblical story, also knew what it was like to have no sail. She had money, success, power and influence in a society where other women had none. Like Mill who had it all, she had an empty sense that there was more to life; she had an inquiring hunger in her soul. Her longing thirst led her down to the river side where she joined a group of marginalized women who were seeking God. There she began nurturing the soil of her soul by learning the stories of Israel's faith. As they worshiped and prayed together, the empty space within her became filled with personal stories, spiritual wisdom, and the dynamic image of a God of compassion, justice, and steadfast love who had great expectations for humankind.

One day, after they had finished praying, a Jewish man came and sat down with them, surprising them all by crossing a social boundary. Shock turned to totally outrageous when he sat down to speak to them (women) about religious matters. He told them about Jesus and

about how the God of Israel had raised Jesus from the dead. Lydia listened, learned, and felt the good news of Jesus' love for her fill her soul's sail. Lydia responded to the gospel by being baptized and providing hospitality to the gospel preachers. What began as a sharing of home and hearth with strangers, led to the start of a house-church in gentile territory. It was a community of faith that told Jesus stories and provided food and shelter to the homeless who had been released from prison.

The first European Christian was a gentile woman, named Lydia. She was a foremother of our faith whose sense of lostness disappeared as she claimed her identity as a beloved child of God and follower of Jesus. *The story of Lydia is a story about the early church, about mission, about providing housing and economic resources, about discernment, about hospitality, community, and, the experience of women in the church* (Sermon Seeds, 5/2/10). She was our foremother in faith who invited Jesus into her heart and into her home--- learning, telling, and living the stories of Jesus' Love. And that, made a world of difference in how they prayed.

God of all creation---of all time and space; of all people near and far; of all our hopes and fears; of all wisdom and grace; out of our faith, we reach out to your world. We have made mistakes, but we have learned. Out of our passion, we extend ourselves. We have sown seeds of justice, love and peace, throughout the garden of creation. God of hope and promise, continue to use us as your instruments with eyes of wisdom, continue to use us to spread your music with ears of compassion, continue to use us to tend your garden with hands of humility. God with abundance you provide, as we continue to sow your seeds. Keep us grounded in the work of Jesus and blooming in faith. Amen. (Sermon Seeds, 5/2/10)

One day, several years ago while I was standing at the deli-counter at a grocery store, I was surprised by the deli-worker. Immediately after I said: "May I please have a ½ pound of smoked turkey;" he said: "You love Jesus?" Confused, my first response was to ask myself, (What does smoked turkey have to do with Jesus?) Next I reasoned that I must have misunderstood the man because he spoke with a foreign accent. At the same time that I was thinking that it was my bad, I was making the self assessment that I wasn't doing anything to indicate that I love Jesus. So while I was wondering about his powers of intuition and my transparency, I came back with the question: "How did you know?" When he said nothing and pointed his finger back at me, I squirmed inside. I wondered if J-e-s-u-s was printed on my forehead or if I had left one of those **Hell-o my name is Carol** church name tags on my shirt. Finally, still grinning from ear to ear, he said: "Your Cross." As I clutched my cross which I forgot that I was wearing, I smiled too. Confusion turned to peace as I was filled with the joy that comes from loving and serving Jesus.

Before Jesus died, Jesus said these words of assurance to his disciples who had consistently lost their way every time he wasn't there to lead them: In John 14:23 we read:

**Those who love me will keep my word
and my Father will love them,
And we will come to them
and make our home with them.**

In his reflection on Lydia's story of faith, Biblical scholar Cole-Turner commented: "Longing and grace meet there on the bank of the river" (Feasting on the Word). A passionate disciple of Jesus was born. And, for those of us church go-ers who love Jesus and let his teaching seep into our heart and soul, we know that's exactly how the Holy Spirit still grows us up into a beloved people of God, who bless the world today.