

A small, old country church was planning to add-on to their existing building, a needed addition. The cost was over \$500,000. The funds were slow in coming, and it really looked like the project wouldn't get off the ground. One day, a couple of brothers, old, dingy, grumpy farmers, came to the pastor. Who knew what to expect?

Well, the first brother walk right up to the pastor and handed him a check for \$250,000, walked back to his brother. What a generous gift! And then...the other brother walked up and handed the pastor another check...\$250,000. Just like that, the project was paid for.

Now, I can't remember whether that story is true or not, but the point is clear. The risen Savior was working in those brothers. He opened their hearts to serve the Lord. He does that for us, too. The risen Savior Still Acts. He Opens Hearts!

That had to be one of the greatest blessings in the apostle Paul's life, was to see the risen Savior open hearts, his own first, and then many others, to see the Holy Spirit working saving faith in countless numbers of people.

You see, Paul had the privilege to serve Christ by being a missionary, and a great one at that. He eagerly took the message of the risen Savior throughout Asia Minor. He started up numerous congregations, usually stayed at them just long enough to train leaders and to help the congregations be able to stand on their feet, and then he was off, finding the next locations to plant a church.

At those congregations, there were some who were already faithful followers of the Lord, but there also had to be people who were hearing the message of the gospel from Paul for the very first time.

For him, it had to be incredible to see Jesus at work in these Christian converts, and to see Jesus working through these converts. Our sermon text this morning gives us a great example of one of them, a woman by the name of Lydia.

Now, Paul was on his second major missionary trip, and his original plan, itinerary, had been altered a bit by God. Paul possessed a burning desire to head straight for Ephesus because he saw great potential there for the seed of the gospel to be planted and then for it to produce a bountiful harvest of believers in Christ. But we're told in the book of Acts that Paul and his companions were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word there. Instead, God was calling Paul to go over to Macedonia, present-day Greece.

Paul faithfully went, and his travels in Greece led him to Philippi, one of the leading cities in Macedonia. On the Sabbath, which the Jewish Sunday, their day of worship, Paul did what he normally did at any city he visited. He went to where the people were gathering to worship, to their place of prayer.

Do you notice here where Paul went? He went down by the river. A little different from where Paul usually first went, which was to the synagogue, because that's where the largest concentration of Jewish believers would be.

There wasn't a synagogue in Philippi. It wasn't because there weren't believers there. But according to Jewish law, 10 Jewish men were needed to start a synagogue. Philippi, being outside of Israel, didn't have a lot of Jewish families, but instead had more Gentile believers. Not that this core of believers was any weaker. They just had a different place of worship. So that's where Paul went.

At the river, Paul preached to the people gathered there, actually, most were women. And one of those women in attendance? A businesswoman by the name of Lydia. A quite successful businesswoman at that.

You see, we know she was a dealer of purple cloth. Today, that's might now sound so impressive. You know, purple cloth, just run to Walmart or Joann's, and you can get yards of purple fabric fairly inexpensively.

A better comparison to today would be that Lydia was like a rare jewel dealer. Because, honestly, that's what purple dye was. Rare and expensive. Purple dye could only be produced by extracting the thin purple liquor of a shellfish. Very labor intensive, the amount of dye from each shellfish was tiny, so the cost to gather purple dye in any size quantity was correspondingly great.

Lydia had to be doing pretty well for herself. But she was one of the ladies listening to Paul preach. She was a worshipper of God, likely someone who knew about God, who knew about the promise of the gospel, but hadn't heard the greatest news yet, that Jesus had come, the fulfillment of that promise, who lived, died, and rose to save the world from sin.

She heard Paul's message of Christ crucified, and the risen Savior acted. The Lord opened her heart. She believed Paul's gospel message. And then, she responded.

Do you know how she did? Her first response was to be baptized, to receive that forgiveness of sins Jesus offers through the water and the Word. And not just for her. But her entire household. Children, parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, even her servants, the entire household was baptized that very day.

And she went even further, inviting Paul and his companions to spend the night at her house. And as much as they politely declined, she wouldn't take no for an answer. She even said, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay..." They couldn't say no to that. So they stayed. Paul even eventually made her house his headquarters for his future visits to Philippi.

Did you see how the risen Savior was acting in Lydia? Now, there was a woman whose heart was on fire for her Lord. Lydia's hospitality was a great confession of her faith, not only to Paul and his friends, but to all of her neighbors as well. It told them her love of her risen Savior and his Word was not just a Sunday morning affair.

Lydia is exactly the type of branch Jesus was talking about in our gospel for this morning. The Lord did all the work. Grafting Lydia in with the vine, with himself, by giving her the gift of the Holy Spirit, saving faith. He opened her heart to believe and to receive his gift of grace. And then, he opened her heart to act, for her branch to respond, to bear fruit.

If only we could all be as strong of a branch as Lydia was. If only we could as on fire for the Lord as she was.

I'll be the first to admit I've lost a little bit of it. Almost like getting stuck in a rut, where, even just a few months ago, fresh out of the seminary, eager to move up here, begin the Lord's work, with the greatest expectations of all the solid sermons and Bible classes I would write, how I would be active in military and university ministries. How my zeal for the Great Commission would show every single minute of every single day. And then the months go by, and I'll admit, there have been days where my eagerness has been lacking, my goals not being met. There have been times where my branch is drooping.

And you. Where's your fire? Where's your eagerness? You know, to live each day as God's dear child, letting everyone know you are a believer by everything you say and everything you do. And then...the lull comes.

Getting sloppy in your life as a believer, first it was one sin, maybe "I told a lie at work, no one found out, I didn't get in trouble," and then it leads to more lies, not just at work, but at home, with friends.

Or bills were a bit tight for a few months, so I cut down on my offerings to church, and from there, they slowly dwindled until I wasn't giving anything, probably not the best way to show my thanks and appreciation to God, who has given me everything I own, everything I am in this life.

Or...there were these committees started at church, to serve the Lord in a variety of ways, and they all sound great...for others to do. But not me. I'm too busy.

And then the worst, the opportunity to carry out our mission as believers through our words and our actions, and we don't, giving in the lusts of our sinful natures and the temptations of the devil.

If you were to look at the vine, at Jesus, he would look great. The rest of the tree, however, us being the branches, doesn't always look healthy, vibrant, full of life. Rather, in our lives as believers, burdened by sin, we often look droopy, weak, in dire need of some tender love and care.

But the vine provides the life-giving nourishment the branches need to survive. That's what our Vine, Jesus did with us. Because at one time, you and I were dead branches. You know what happens to a branch that's dead. It gets burned. We were dead in our transgressions and sins, well on our way to being tossed into the eternal fires of hell.

But Jesus took us and made us alive. He lived, he died, he rose so he could do that. Because to bring us back to life from death, Jesus needed to live a perfect life, in our place. He did. To save us from our sins, Jesus needed to take every sin of all time, carry them himself, straight to the cross, and die there, so we could be forgiven. He did. And then, to show he was God, to fulfill Scripture, and to secure our eternal future, Jesus needed to rise. He did. We still rejoice in that resurrection, even today, the 5th week of our Easter celebration.

Because of his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus saved us. In his love, our risen Savior opened our hearts to receive his grace, his righteousness, forgiveness for our sins. He grafted us in to himself, as

branches to his vine, the true tree of life. He did so through the gift of faith. The Holy Spirit, working saving faith, through the means of grace, the gospel in the Word, like Paul's preaching to Lydia, or the gospel in the Sacraments, like Lydia's entire household, baptized by Paul.

That is how Jesus has brought you to him as well. Through the gospel, through preaching, through the Sacrament of baptism. And now, in his grace, Jesus keeps us connected to the tree, the vine, to himself. We have life, a life which isn't stagnant, but vibrant, healthy. A life which produces fruit.

As you know, the vine not only keeps the branches alive.. Because of our vine, our risen Savior, we, the branches, we thrive. Jesus opens our hearts to act, to respond. In our lives, we see how we've been blessed by God.

With material blessings...clothes, a car, food, a house, TV, computers, toys. We've been blessed with non-material blessings...health, gifts and abilities, friends and family. And best of all, each of us has been blessed with greater spiritual blessings...saving faith, understanding, forgiveness, peace, heaven.

All of those blessings, especially the last group, move us to a thankfulness to God that must produce fruit...fruits of faith. Why? It's realizing the incredible love of God, who raised you from the depths of your sins, made you his own, put his Holy Spirit into your heart, giving you saving faith in him...literally saved your life. We are forever indebted to him. Now, how can I use my blessings, from God to express my heartfelt thanks to God?

Lydia did, with the hospitality she showed to Paul, using her blessings, her wealth to support the work of the Lord. And you do, too. You have responded, generously.

With your treasures, what give to the work of the Lord week after week. Hours dedicated to serving God and his church: cleaning, playing keyboard, teaching Sunday school, serving on committees. Hours dedicated to serving at work or home: changing diapers, giving encouragement, doing more than your fair share, helping without being asked—they are all fruits of faith!

God treasures the fruits of his branches. God treasures the service of those who serve. He treasures the work you do for him!

Martin Luther once made this illustration. Plant a tree upside-down with the leaves in the ground and the roots in the air, and you kill it. Plant the roots in the ground where they can draw water and nutrients from the soil, and it will produce fruit.

We draw our water from Jesus, the Living Water. We get our nutrients from the Word. There, we see what our Savior has done. There we read his promises for us still.

We see our risen Savior still at work. He opens hearts. He's done that for you and me. By his grace, he's grafted us to the vine, connected us to himself. And with that water, and those nutrients, fruits will grow. They must. We can't help it. We'll insist they do. God makes them happen! Amen.