

## Easter Means...We Have a New Heart!

A sermon based on Acts 16:11-15

When Heather was twelve years old, she went to the dentist for her regular checkup. But she got a small cut while she was there and that's when the bacteria made its way in to her bloodstream. The bacteria infected her heart and did permanent damage to her valves. But after four open heart surgeries, Heather's now just fine. Today she's twenty-six years old and teaches first grade. Her life changed—her life was saved!—because her heart was opened up and fixed.

When Lydia was living in Europe she too had her heart opened up and fixed. And her life was saved because of it. Through the preaching of the apostle Paul and his companion, Silas, the Holy Spirit opened her heart to believe the Gospel. And her life was changed. She couldn't help but respond in overwhelming gratitude.

And our Risen Savior still acts today. Using his surgical tools of the Word and Sacraments, he still opens up hearts and fixes them. He still saves lives by opening hearts to receive his grace! He still changes lives by opening hearts to respond to his grace.

Now, we don't know too much about Lydia outside of this account. But I believe God chose to honor her by having her name recorded in the pages of Scripture because of the wonderful example she left us. Originally from the Greek city of Thyatira, well known in the ancient world for the rare purple dye extracted from a mussel that grew there, Lydia brought the trade with her when she left for Philippi. But since the dye was so rare, supply and demand made purple cloth very expensive, the color worn only by royalty and the very wealthy. And it made Lydia wealthy herself.

But what did Lydia do with that money? She generously used it to host four traveling missionaries: Paul and Silas, Timothy and Luke. And though I'm sure they were polite about it, their original response was, "No. We will not take you up on your offer." But Lydia persuaded them. Literally, she prevailed upon them. She wouldn't take no for an answer. But she was eager to spend the wealth that she'd earned to support the work of the Church.

But why? What made her so willing, so insistent even, to give up what she'd worked so hard to get? Well, in short, it was because God changed her heart.

Even though she was from a Greek city, somewhere she heard about the true God. "A worshipper of God" was a title given to a Greek who had converted to Judaism. Apparently there weren't too many Jewish men in Philippi or none bold enough to lead since there was no synagogue and there were no men present at the river. But Lydia gathered faithfully with the other women to worship Jehovah. But apparently she didn't yet know about her Savior.

And honestly, she couldn't know about her Savior—not on her own. She had no way of knowing God had already sent the Messiah in the person of Jesus. But Paul and company told her by God's grace. And she had no way of believing that the message they shared was true—not on her own. You'll notice that our text doesn't say, "Lydia decided to accept Jesus into her heart." It doesn't say, "Lydia chose to believe." It doesn't even say, "Lydia then had faith." Lydia's not the subject of the sentence! But notice who does get the credit: ***"The Lord opened her heart to respond to [the] message."***

Though she wasn't a part of God's family by nature, God chose her to become his own. God sent the missionaries to Philippi. God gave Lydia the ability to hear and understand what they said. God opened up her heart so she could positively respond to the message Paul proclaimed. And by opening her heart God brought her into his family.

Now I'm pretty sure most of us here aren't Jewish either—not a part of God's natural family. And the fact we were outsiders was evidenced by the way we behaved toward God.

You see, I'm also pretty sure most of us here have far more vibrant colors in our wardrobes than Lydia even dreamed of having. I'm sure we have far greater wealth—even the poorest among us. After all, Lydia never had motorized vehicles, running water, or computers and TV's. Nor did she ever dream of such luxuries. But we have incredible wealth.

Yet how do we use that wealth? Do we eagerly spend it on whatever supports the mission of the Church? Do we eagerly open our very homes to complete strangers in order that the Gospel might be spread? Do we refuse to take "no" for an answer and do whatever it takes to give generously of the blessings God's given? Not that often, do we?

And why not? Because our hearts were diseased. They were selfish. They were full of self-serving sin. And we were like dead branches, cut off from the tree that gives life. Like fruitless branches doing nothing good, fit only for the fire.

But God in his grace wouldn't take "no" as an answer from us. With his relentless grace he pursued us. He sent someone to share the message of Jesus with us. He performed open heart surgery—opening our hearts to respond to the Good News that our every sin is paid for by Jesus' blood shed for us on the cross!

And now we're like dead branches grafted in to the living tree. I don't know if you've ever seen that before, branches taken from other trees – maybe from a dying tree – and grafted into the stump of other trunk. Because with that, branches that are cut off and destined to die, now have life. And that's what God did for us! We who were once dead, lifeless branches, have been grafted into God's family tree, just like Lydia was.

And it wasn't because we chose God or decided to believe in him, but just like it was for Lydia. It was because God opened our hearts through the Word like he did for Lydia and through the waters of Baptism. And we still have life because he keeps our hearts open by keeping us connected to those means of grace, so we're always connected to the Vine that is Jesus. And now we have life! And that life isn't stagnant. What lives produces fruit...

Look at Lydia again. She must have been industrious to become a dealer in purple cloth. She must have been quite wealthy as a result. And she must have had a pretty nice home—one that could easily accommodate another four fully grown men and their appetites without any advanced notice or preparation. She must have been successful to have a household—either of kids or servants—and manage them along with her business. But what did she do with her hard-earned wealth? She gave it away!

She recognized one fruit of faith she could produce was to spend her money, not on herself, but on the mission. And she was eager to do it. She was insistent. "No, no." I'm sure Paul said, "That's really quite a

generous offer—to house all four of us—but we really couldn't put you out like that. In fact, we have this policy, you see. We never burden those we minister to. We never want anyone to get the impression we only do what we do for financial gain. But again, thank you. And we'll see you in the morning."

"No!" I can imagine Lydia firing back. "I'm not asking you. I'm telling you. I'm not giving you an invite here. You **will** stay at my place—all four of you. You will eat the best food I have to offer. You will drink my very best drink. You will sleep in the best beds I can find. I absolutely insist and I will be offended and hurt if you refuse me." **"If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded [them].** She prevailed upon them, so insistent was she that she could demonstrate her faith and respond to God's grace. Why? Because God had opened her heart to respond to his grace.

And friends, it's no different for you. Just look at all the colors in your clothes this morning! And think of all the things you own that Lydia, with all of her wealth, never dreamed of! You most likely have more items in your home that are used for your hobbies and leisure time activities than you have tools for the work you do to support yourself. You have more food in your cupboards and refrigerators than Lydia could have imagined.

And you are blessed with other, non-material, blessings: health, gifts and abilities, friends and family, free time. Those are wonderful gifts of God that we take for granted way too often! And then we have the even greater spiritual blessings that God has given us—Spirit-given understanding, the forgiveness of our sins and the peace it brings us, heaven itself with the mansions God has prepared for us there!

And all these gifts—and especially these latter, greater gifts—move us to such overwhelming gratitude that we cannot help but produce fruits of faith. We simply **must** show our God how thankful we are for all he's done and for all he's given, for opening our hearts and grafting us in to his family tree! For by his great grace to us he continues to open our hearts to fill them with appreciation and gratitude again that must respond to his grace in works of service.

Do you know why they graft branches into stumps? It's so all the water and nutrients that had been going to heal and grow the entire tree, now went right into the fruit, making it grow bigger and faster and more delicious than ever. In fact, a pastor talks about a trip to Israel where one man had successfully created a tree in his back yard that grew lemons, limes, oranges, and mangos—all in the same tree! (And he was thinking about trying to add an avocado branch!) But branches are grafted to the stump to give those branches life **so that** those branches would produce fruit.

In the same way, God has grafted us into his family tree not just so we can sit around providing shade, but so we can produce fruit—big, flourishing fruit that looks delicious to God! And you have produced that kind of fruit!

You have given generously of your hard-earned dollars. A couple of Sundays ago, our treasurer noted, besides being over \$2000 ahead in our offerings for the year, we've met the funding for our roof fund (after starting less than a year ago), and we're \$21,000 where we were financially last year. You are giving very generously!

Count up the hours of time that members spend at church, volunteering their time to play the organ or piano, to attend important meetings, to clean the building, to teach Sunday School, to count the

offerings, to plan different events, and to do all the other things that need to be done around here and I'll bet the number is in the thousands per year! You do give generously of your time!

And it's not just *here*! Consider the hours you spend in humble service to others: cleaning your home, showing love to your spouse and kids, encouraging your co-workers, carrying more than your fair share of the work or changing a diaper without complaint. You've shared your faith. You've invited your friends to worship! And these are all wonderful fruits of faith! When I look out at the people sitting in the chairs this morning, I see a whole lot of Lydias—a whole lot of saints who won't take "no" for an answer, but *must* serve others to serve their Savior out of thanks to him!

Now don't stop! Keep it up! Not because you have to, but because you long to. Because you'll go crazy if you can't find some release for your overwhelming desire to thank Jesus for all he's done for you! For by his grace, you are connected to the true vine. In him you have life! And as you *remain* in him and he in you, you *will* bear much fruit. You'll draw water from the Living Water and get the nutrients your faith needs from the Word. And rejoicing in his grace, your faith will grow and you'll produce more and bigger fruit! You won't be able to help it. You won't take "no" for an answer, but will find a way to thank God for opening your heart to receive his grace and for opening your heart to respond to his grace. Amen.