

Easter 6 - Year C

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St. Augustine's in the Woods

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I love the color purple! I have a poem on the wall above my desk that starts with "When I am an old woman, I shall wear purple." I also love the book and movie called "The Color Purple". Purple is a sign of royalty, status and wealth but it is also the color of Lent so this color evokes a variety of emotions. Consequently, when the lectionary includes the reading from Acts about Lydia and her purple cloth, I get very excited.

Lydia is a business woman from Thyatira, a city that was famous for the purple dying industry. The story about Lydia comes in a section of the Book of Acts called the Great Missionary Journey in which Paul and Silas set out to return to every city where they had proclaimed the word of God to check up on the faithful and see how they were doing. Of course, they picked up a few more converts along the way and Lydia was one. Lydia was a Jew living in the diaspora which describes any area not of the Holy Land. There was no synagogue. Though she was devout, her gender prevented her from being a founding member of a synagogue and there were simply not enough other Jews to provide the funding so they prayed by the riverside. That is where she encountered Paul and his companions. Lydia's response to the message of the gospel was sheer liberation and in her enthusiasm, she invited the visitors to stay in her house.

Lydia is the first Christian in Europe, long before St. Augustine, who we will get to in a bit. What is so important about this albeit brief story is that the Gospel was able to free women from previous restraints, giving them new roles as founding members of Christian house churches. House churches were the norm in the early days of Christianity. There were no grand cathedrals or even simple churches such as ours. People simply gathered in each other's homes. When the need arose for hospitality, it was extended. Hospitality is a common theme in the New Testament and Lydia was no exception in offering a place to stay to Paul and his companions. Lydia stood out among the early Christians. Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople in the 4th century and considered the best preacher of the early church fathers called Lydia a "truly faithful woman."

The gospel writer Luke gives women greater importance than the authors of the other gospels. In fact, the gospel of Luke has often been called the social justice gospel. The Book of Acts which Luke also authored has important stories about women though they are often overlooked because of their brevity. Lydia's story is an important example of

how God's saving grace dismantles various social barriers that cultivate strife among people. It is a story about the countercultural world of the early church. There is no mention of a husband and it is presumed that Lydia was a single businesswoman with a decent income. That Lydia and Paul, a female outsider and a male religious leader, have a congenial relationship is quite remarkable. When Lydia's home becomes a spiritual center we can only assume that Lydia was the spiritual leader.

As most of you know today is the patronal feast day for our church. It is the feast day of Augustine of Canterbury who is not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo whose doctrine of original sin and negative views of sexuality have done untold damage to the church and individuals. Probably of aristocratic birth, our Augustine was prior of the Benedictine monastery of St. Andrew in Rome when St. Gregory the Great chose him to lead an unprecedented mission of about 40 monks to England, which was at the time, during the 6th and 7th century, largely pagan. They left in June 596, but, arriving in southern Gaul, they were warned of the perils awaiting them and were sent back to Rome. There, Gregory encouraged Augustine with letters of commendation, and he set out once more. The entourage landed in the spring of 597 on the Isle of Thanet, off the southeast coast of England, and was well received by King Althelberht of Kent, who gave the missionaries a dwelling place in Canterbury and the old St. Martin's Church, where he allowed them to preach. With Aethelberht's support, their work led to many conversions, including that of the King. In the following autumn Augustine was consecrated bishop of the English, becoming the first archbishop of Canterbury.

St. Augustine's Benedictine background no doubt provided the spiritual grounding need to navigate the dangerous waters of a religiously complicated region and so he is beloved by Anglicans to this day who still uphold his preaching of the *via media* or the middle way which is so characteristic of the Anglican Church throughout the world including, of course, the Episcopal Church here in this country. This idea of the *via media* is cherished by Episcopalians. And if for some reason you are not familiar with this concept, I will unpack it for you, at least a bit. At its best, the *via media* allows for a diversity of theological thinking. It is not as some critics might say "middle of the road". We are both and - both catholic or universal and protestant. We cherish the mystics but also have a deep appreciation for reason. We love the fullness of our liturgical life but also appreciate the simplicity of a day of quiet. We are at once a sacramental tradition and a Biblical one. The diversity which we celebrate in the midst of Holy Chaos is a public appreciation of the wholeness of humanity and the *via media* commits us to seeing the Communion as a family in which there is free association, discussion and mutual respect. I do believe that these qualities of Anglicanism will serve this church well as we move toward the interim. And it all started with Augustine of Canterbury.

These two figures Lydia of Thyatira and Augustine of Canterbury, though centuries apart, offer great contributions to the way we Episcopalians view the world. Generosity, forward thinking, the role of women in the church, hospitality, the importance of critical reasoning and a deep appreciation of the spiritual life all have their place in our tradition. As we face the many perils of our current world, we need to draw on the energy of those in the past who can help to ground us in times of need. Lydia and Augustine can offer us the courage to speak as both of these mighty people of faith navigated dangerous territory and spoke of the power of God in their lives. We too need the power of the Almighty as we remember those who have died serving our country, as we face the dire consequences of so many decisions that are shattering the world we know... Lydia and Augustine can offer us hope because without hope we are lost souls. As you go forth today, be emboldened by the power of the Spirit and our spiritual guides Lydia and Augustine, our companions along the way.