

Acts of the Ordinary: Lydia

Acts 16:13-15; 40

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness.

Intro

If you've spent any amount of time in church or in Christian circles, you've probably heard some "BIG stories." You know the ones I'm talking about:

- the story of the drug addict overcoming their addiction through the strength of Christ
- the revival preacher who sees thousands of people join the church
- the Christian who professes their faith in the face of certain death

We like to share these BIG stories of faith. We like, share, and repost these stories on social media. And we hold up these people as the ultimate examples of Christian faithfulness.

Now I don't know about you, but if I'm honest with myself, sometimes these BIG stories leave me and my faith feeling a little small. After all, I don't feel like I've done anything BIG with my life. And I haven't been given an opportunity to demonstrate my faith in a BIG way like that.

Maybe sometimes you feel the same way, too.

Like you aren't quite sure how you can demonstrate your faithfulness to God (as someone who's retired, who's a teacher, who's just trying to get through). **How can we be faithful to God where we're at, with what we have?**

Today, we're going to look at the story of a woman named Lydia, who is no one particularly special, and whose story only takes up 5 verses. But I think we can learn something from the way she goes about answering the question: **How can I be faithful to God in my ordinary life?**

We are Faithful to God When We Continue to Show Up

Now, before we dive into Lydia's story, there's a few things we need to unpack first.

v. 11-12 pick up the story of Paul, Silas, and Timothy, who have been traveling around, encouraging churches and starting new ones. So, in **v. 11-12**, it says this:

From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

We are seeing their church planting expedition shift geographically from modern-day Palestine, Iraq, and Iran, to Greece, Turkey, and the rest of Europe.

Now, while their geography might have changed, their church-planting strategy has not. They spend time in the city and then on the Sabbath day, their day of worship, they look around for a Jewish temple. See, their strategy was to spend time in the temple, where the Jews worshipped God, and to help turn their worship not only to the God of Israel, but to the God of Israel revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

But unlike many of the other places they visited when they traveled, here in this new place, Philippi, there is no Jewish Temple. In fact, there is very little influence of Judaism at all. See, according to Jewish law, in order for

there to be an official worship gathering, for them to have a temple, there had to be 10 Jewish men available to lead the gathering.

But as Paul, Silas, and Timothy quickly find out, there are not even 10 Jewish men in the city. There is no temple for them to go to.

Do you ever feel like this? Like, as a Christian person who is deeply committed to following the ways of Jesus, there's sort of this gap? You've got religious extremism and fundamentalism on one side, and civil, nonreligious activism on the other side. But then here you are - deeply committed to your Christian faith AND to living it out in civil and public action. But where do you fit? Where do you belong in the midst of this polarizing religious landscape?

And while these statistics could cause us some anxiety, they could also provide us with an opportunity. At least that's the way Lydia saw it.

When Lydia and her female companions in Philippi looked around the city and discovered there was no Jewish temple for them to join, they were not easily discouraged. They decided they could be faithful to God by continuing to show up. Lydia didn't need a building, a large group of people, or the support of her own town to faithfully show up in worshipping God.

So, every week, as that Christian folk song says, she went "down to the river to pray." And Paul, Silas, and Timothy heard about it. V.13 says:

On the Sabbath we [Paul, Silas, and Timothy] went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

Although she had every reason to stay home, to abandon what everyone around her deemed an antiquated and unnecessary faith, **the spirit was at work through Lydia's ordinary faithfulness - of her commitment to showing up.**

As you and I sit in a unique cultural moment, where churches are shrinking and holding onto faith in God is called antiquated and unnecessary, **the spirit is at work through our ordinary faithfulness. When we:**

- Continue praying
- Continue reading scripture together
- Continue worshipping with each other
- Continue serving our community
- Continue looking for God everywhere we go and whomever we are with

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we continue to show up.

I've had the privilege of attending a number of funerals in my life. And I call it a "privilege" intentionally. See, I've never been to a funeral where the person had a "BIG Story," like all of those we hold as the ultimate examples of Christian faithfulness.

But I find myself continually being moved as I hear story after story about those committed to a lifetime of faithful obedience to God. Stories of those who continued to show up in faith.

What if these stories became our ultimate examples of Christian faithfulness? Not just the people like Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, or Dietrich Bonhoeffer?

But the single mothers who work multiple jobs to feed their families? The retired professionals who volunteer their time and talent to local non-profits? The public school teachers who work for too little pay, and show up with a smile on their face anyway?

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we continue to show up. Even in the little things... even when no one is looking or giving you applause for it.

But Lydia's story isn't done yet... v. 14

One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.

We are Faithful to God When We Turn Toward Jesus

Lydia is introduced as a "worshiper of God" or other translations call her a "God-fearer." This title describes people who meet to pray and worship God, but who don't know about or believe in Jesus yet.

But it says in verse 14 that her heart was opened to respond to Paul's message. The message that Paul is sharing is the story of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done.

This is the whole point of the book of Acts. It's the origin story of how people went from simply being worshipers of God to believing in who Jesus is and what Jesus does and allowing God's spirit to radically transform them.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we turn toward Christ.

The introduction of Jesus into her life transforms the way she goes about living. And it has the power to transform our lives too. Jesus is God, who took on flesh and blood, and provides an example for how we live, work, and exist in the world.

Turning toward Jesus means daily questioning how the life of Jesus might impact everything you do. The work of Jesus and the relationships you have with Jesus changes the way you...

- Parent
- Engage in politics
- Treat your neighbor
- Deal with conflict
- Manage your finances
- Build relationships with people

Jesus changes everything. **The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we turn toward Christ.**

How might your life reflect a continual turning toward Jesus? So that you might begin to act like, think like, love like, Jesus? Are there areas of your life that you've blocked Jesus out of, told Jesus he doesn't have a "say so" in that area? What would it look like for your life to embody a "turning toward" Jesus?

We are Faithful To God When We Are Generous With What We Have

After accepting Paul's message about Jesus, Lydia immediately springs into action: Acts 16:15

When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

She doesn't keep her relationship with Jesus a secret, she and her entire family are baptized. **The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we are generous with what we have.**

And one of the things Lydia has is a home.

She begs Paul, Silas, and Timothy to stay at her home. Based on the context, we know that Lydia is probably wealthy. She is in the business of making and selling purple cloth and purple cloth was very expensive to make and to sell, it's a very lucrative business.

So she probably is pretty wealthy, she probably knows and does business with the wealthy and elite people of society. She owns her own business; she has a house so she probably has servants or people who work for her.

We don't know whether she's married or has children but the fact that later, they refer to her house as "Lydia's house" and not her husband's and because she is able to offer up her home without asking anyone else means that she may be unmarried; independently wealthy, or at least have lots of autonomy, freedom, and independence.

Lydia is a strong independent woman who doesn't need anybody or anything and yet, she knows what she has is not hers to be selfish with. She offers her home, a bed to sleep in, food to eat, a place to stay. **The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we are generous with what we have.**

And what Lydia has is a home. What do you have? What are the things that you have been given?

- A home?
- A business?
- Financial stability?
- A family?
- Time?
- A Story?

Generosity is not limited to the powerful, the financially stable, or the super-Christian among us. And it isn't limited to what's in our wallets either. Generosity is recognizing that what you have, whatever it is, is not yours to be selfish with. Everything you have can be used as an instrument for Christian faithfulness.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary Christian faithfulness - when we are generous with what we have.

Lydia is a world-changer

Now, Lydia's story is kinda cool because unlike a lot of people we meet in Acts, at the end of chapter 16, we get like a little miniature update on her life.

After staying with Lydia for a little while, Paul and his companions keep travelling around in this region, they find themselves in jail for a little bit and then when they're ready to leave this region, they stop back by Lydia's house on their way out of town.

Verse 40: After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.

Now at first glance, this verse might not mean much to us. But remember at the beginning, when Paul, Silas, and Timothy couldn't find even 10 religious men in the city, and when they left the city of Philippi, presumably, the only Christian in the town were Lydia and her family.

But after they've been gone just a short amount of time (23 verses in fact), there are other brothers and sisters, other Christians meeting in Lydia's home. Lydia's faithfulness to God has a huge impact – an entire church is born! And not just any church, it's the church in Philippians (you know that really important book in the NT?!) It's written about this church. **Lydia's ordinary Christian faithfulness is the reason we have the book of Philippians!**

And not only that, but remember how this is a new part of Paul's journey? This is his first venture away from the Middle East and towards Europe? That means Lydia is one of the first, if not the first Christian in Europe. This is the first church on the European continent! **Lydia's ordinary faithfulness changed the faith of an entire continent!**

Lydia was no one particularly special or important, she had a regular job, a normal life, and her story only takes up 5 verses in scripture. But she chose to be faithful to God. She kept showing up to worship, to pray, and to thank God. She turned toward Jesus and let Jesus direct her life. And she was generous with what she had.

Conclusion

I don't think Lydia knew the kind of influence she would have. I don't think she thought of herself having a "BIG story," and I certainly don't think she ever would have believed we'd still be talking about her 2,000 years later.

But I think she believed that she could be faithful to God right where she was. **And we can be faithful to God right where we're at, too.**

Maybe this place will become the birthplace of a movement that shifts the statistics back in favor of Christians deeply committed to faith and action. Maybe this will become a place that people are still talking about in 2,000 years. And maybe not. But that's okay because being faithful to God has nothing to do with BIG stories anyway.

The Spirit is at work through ordinary faithfulness.

A few years ago, a documentary came out about Mother Teresa, one of the world's most remarkable and influential Christians. And during it, one of the commentators asked Mother Teresa if her work helping the poor and disenfranchised of society ever felt hopeless and futile given how great the task was. And she responded like this, "I was not called to be successful, but faithful. Each one of us has something beautiful to do for God."

This week, may you practice ordinary faithfulness - through continuing to show up, through turning toward Christ, and through being generous with what you have. Because the Spirit is at work through ordinary faithfulness and each one of us has something beautiful to do for God.