

Biblical Womanhood

May 22, 2022

Biblical Womanhood

Many of you may not be aware that we had a protester much of last summer. It was a lone individual. He stood across the street on the sidewalk at the corner of the park, holding signs about the heresy of women in leadership. He was protesting that I don't belong pastoring a church because of my gender.

(I laughed at the time because there may be any number of reasons one might protest my leadership, but my gender is the least valid of those reasons.)

Because of the day and age we live in, I encouraged some church leaders to cross the street to talk with him and others to take pictures, and when I got back to my office the first day he was here, I did call the police. I called the police, not as someone angry and entitled, but as a shepherd protecting her flock. The police did check him out and stepped up their patrolling during church services, and as it turns out, I learned from colleagues that he protested other churches with women in leadership, too, though Union seemed to be his most frequent stop.

I share this with you today in part because he comes to mind after every tragic church shooting, both to reassure you that we don't take red flags lightly, and also to encourage your vigilance. We hold as two of our highest priorities welcoming the stranger and keeping everyone here safe.

But he also comes to mind because of the passage from the Acts of the Apostles that Janet just read for us. It's a passage that many aren't familiar with, largely because we typically only read the Acts of the Apostles in worship during the Easter season, but it's a goldmine, especially as one is looking to explore Biblical womanhood.

Acts 16:9-15

The passage starts out talking about how Paul has a vision of a Macedonian person encouraging Paul and his contingent to come help them. They sailed to Philippi in Macedonia, and we're told that Macedonia is a Roman colony, a fact that will end up being important later.

On the sabbath, Paul and his people search out other believers in Jesus and find a group of women praying by the river outside the gates of the city. Here, they encounter Lydia. We're told that she is from Thyatira (THY-uh-TEER-uh) and that she is a dealer of purple cloth.

In just these few brief lines, we find both a lot of details and quite a bit of ambiguity. First, we're told that Lydia is a worshiper of God. It doesn't say that she's Jewish or even that she's monotheistic. We just hear that she's a worshiper of Yahweh. Second, she is from Thyatira, so we know that she's a Gentile. Third, she is a dealer in purple cloth.

Now, the dye to create purple cloth was magnificently expensive in the ancient world, so much so that purple became associated with royalty because they were the only ones who were able to afford such a luxury. And we're told that Lydia is a dealer in purple cloth. She's a business woman, a merchant, and furthermore, we learn in the next verse that she is the head of her own household. This wealthy, powerful, spiritual woman hears the Word of God as preached by Paul

and is so moved that she asks that she and her household be baptized, and then she opens up her home for Paul and his companions to stay with her.

In Lydia, we encounter not just a woman whose full and complete agency is never even called into question, we find a powerful witness of a woman who becomes a patron of the cause of furthering the spread of the Gospel. Lydia's compound becomes a missionary center of sorts, providing hospitality and provision for those who are spreading the Good News of Jesus' radical love throughout the region.

Every so often, folks will talk with me about "Biblical womanhood." Invariably, they're advocating complementarianism, the idea that God made two genders with distinct attributes, and that the only way to live a life faithful to the Bible is to abide by those constraints. They'll quote Proverbs to encourage meekness and either Colossians or Ephesians about wives being submissive to their husbands.

These folk who are trying to help me, and all women, to know our role, never lift up Lydia, the businesswoman head of household who bankrolled Paul's ministry. We never hear them lift up Prisca and Aquila who were two of the 72 disciples Luke tells us Jesus sent out to teach and heal, and who Paul names in Romans as "fellow workers in Christ Jesus." Those who advocate for a return to "Biblical womanhood" never cite Esther or Judith from the Old Testament, or Tabitha or Phoebe from the New. They never talk about the fact that Mary of Bethany sat at Jesus' feet to learn with the men while her sister did the serving, and that she was praised for it.

And so, when people lift up the idea of "Biblical womanhood" to you, know that the text is no more univocal on what it means to be a woman than it is on what marriage is. The Bible is a compendium of 66 books which are, as scripture scholar Sister Barbara Ried, O.P. puts it, "people's written expression of their experience of God."

Acts 16:16-40

In fact, just to demonstrate how multifaceted the Biblical portrayal of the human experience is, I've asked Janet to continue reading the Acts of the Apostles from where we just left off. Now, THAT's a story! There's so much more here than we can unpack in one worship service, so let me just offer that we'll work with this passage again sometime.

What I would like to lift up is Paul's very, very different treatment of the slave girl from that of how he treats Lydia. Again, let's go back to the text.

We start out hearing about a female slave who has a spirit of divination who brings her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. In this one verse, we get a picture of "Biblical womanhood" that is completely opposite that of Lydia. There's no agency here, no autonomy, no dignity. Not only are we never told the female slave's name, her value is only described by the financial gain she can bring her traffickers. We're told that she brings in a great deal of money fortune telling, and in the scene we encounter, she follows Paul and his companions around, saying, "These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you the way of salvation." She speaks the truth.

In other places in the Bible when people proclaim the truth like this, when they recognize God's action and presence in others, they are lauded, even celebrated, but not here. Here, Paul gets

annoyed. Paul gets annoyed, and so, his motivation to call the spirit out of her is that he's irked, exasperated, his feathers have been ruffled.

Nothing really indicates why he's annoyed, though our Tuesday noon Bible Study did posit that it may be because she says he's a "slave" of the Most High God. Maybe Paul's irritation is that his privilege is being called into question, privilege he was quick to invoke toward the end of the passage when he wants to make sure justice is served. Rather than allowing the magistrates to just quietly brush their brutality toward him and Silas under the rug, Paul has no qualms about invoking his Roman citizenship.

So, while Paul uses his privilege as a Roman citizen to make sure the magistrates don't get off scot-free, we don't see him using that privilege regarding the slave girl. Once her traffickers realize that she can't bring in the amount of money she had before, she's never heard of again.

Conclusion

Isn't it amazing, that in the scope of two back-to-back passages, not even a whole chapter, we can get two so vastly different pictures of "Biblical womanhood"? The contrast between Lydia and the female slave couldn't be more stark. And while I've spent much of our time today laying out examples of how broad the scriptural witness is in regard to the roles and experiences of women, examples which I hope help you to know that any argument for the subjugation of women on the basis of Biblical principles is unfounded, these two passages also give us some meaningful take-aways as regard the living of the faith.

First is Lydia's hospitality and how she uses her resources for the furthering of the Good News. Jennifer Kaalund, who teaches scripture at Iona College in New Rochelle, NY, points out that Paul goes to Macedonia expecting to find a man in need of help, and instead encounters a woman whose hospitality and generosity fuel his future missions. Whether our role here is to be the unexpected, generous, provider of hospitality, or the person who accepts generosity and hospitality from unexpected sources, one reminder here today is that God's ways are so much more expansive than our imaginations, and to be careful not to limit the action of God to what we expect.

The other take-away I'll lift up is how we use our privilege. We hear of Paul using his to make sure the magistrates are held accountable for what they did to him and Silas. Using our privilege to hold people accountable is a strong way to leverage that power. But even more remarkable would have been if he would have used it to impact the slave girl's life. To quote Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, "To those to whom much has been given, much is required." At the end of the story, Paul uses his powers for good.

My wish for him, for the female slave, and for all of us, is that as followers of the Living God, we will see his use of privilege and do even better.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
 Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Acts 16:9-15, 16-40
 Green Bay, Wisconsin
 May 22, 2022