

Two Uppity Women

Mother's Day seems like a really good day to me to talk about uppity women. Before I can explain that statement, I'd better explain what I mean by uppity, because in the past some folks have really gotten upset when they heard I was preaching about uppity women but didn't actually hear the content of what I had to say. An uppity person is someone who lacks power but refuses to acknowledge that fact. An uppity person is someone who is willing to stand and speak against an unjust domination system, knowing full well that they are likely to get crushed for it. In the eyes of Rome and the leaders of the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus was just an uppity Galilean carpenter. In the eyes of the British Empire, Mahatma Gandhi was an uppity Indian. In the eyes of the powerbrokers of the South and their allies, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an uppity negro. We may view those men as heroes now, I certainly do, but in their time, they were troublemakers, malcontents, social deviants, just plain uppity.

Because our dominant culture is and has been primarily a patriarchal one, women who sought change across history have been considered uppity. The Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, famously wrote in 1976, "well-behaved women seldom make history." There's a good t-shirt for you, ladies, or perhaps a sampler quote, if such things still exist. The Bible is full of uppity women. I've lost count of how many sermons I've preached on the uppity Biblical sisterhood but I'm going to keep on preaching them because those women are important role models for our young women and, yes, our young men, too. Whether it is imperialism, sexism, racism, homophobia, or any other kind of injustice you care to name, it is critical that the followers of Jesus remember that the uppity women and men of the Bible are our exemplars of how to combine resistance with grace and fight the good fight. If you hear me say that someone is uppity, you can rest assured that I find that person admirable.

I stand in particular respect for uppity women because so many of them have been significant in my life. My mother, Bonnie Sue Glaze, was an uppity woman. If you ask the folks who remember her, they will almost always talk about how sweet-natured she was, but they also knew it was a bad idea to cross her. Her mother, Gertrude Fuller, was an uppity woman, too. She knew how to wrangle a family, including a sometimes-recalcitrant husband, through the hard life of itinerant work, first as farmhands, later when my grandfather was a pipeliner. Gertie could be a lot of fun, but she was hard as nails when needed. Most folks wouldn't think of my paternal grandmother, Lucille Partney, as a particularly uppity woman but there was a stubbornness beneath her soft exterior that ensured that she usually got her way. I am married to an uppity woman and I have raised another. I'm awfully proud of them both.

With that preamble, then, let me turn our attention to two uppity women in today's scripture in Acts. I think we will find that both of them were bold and uninterested in the strictures that the powers that be might have tried to put on them. Their situations were very different, and it may be that their lives following their encounters with Paul were very different. But both of them are more than worthy of our consideration this morning and it is certainly right and proper to give some time to these women on Mother's Day.

The first woman we encounter in Acts 16, is known as Lydia, although this was almost certainly not her name. Lydia, you see, is the name of the ancient kingdom located in what is now western Turkey where the city of Thyatira was located. Our text here is probably corrupt – Luke may have originally written about a woman from Lydia, a Gentile worshipper of the God of Abraham,

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who was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. Her name is lost to us, though she may have been one of the two leaders in the church at Philippi that Paul mentions in his letter to them – Euodia or Syntyche. Lydia is easier to say, though, so we'll stick with that.

The fact that she was, as Luke writes, “A dealer in purple cloth,” is important. At that time, purple dye was one of the rarest and most expensive dyes known. Purple was, and is, associated with royalty because the only people who could afford purple cloth were fabulously rich. I think it's fair to assume that, just like purveyors of luxury items today, Lydia had plenty of money at hand. Think of her as the owner of the local Prada or Gucci outlet or the dealer who handles Bentleys and Rolls Royce cars. Lydia's clientele would have been the cream of Philippian society. Her money would have brought her a certain amount of security and power. If there was any way for a woman to gain clout in public affairs in that time, it was through wealth, whether inherited or earned in business. Successful businesswomen were not unknown in the Roman world. In the ancient city of Herculaneum, the “other” city besides Pompeii buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79 and, incidentally, the namesake of my father's hometown in Missouri, one of the largest buildings excavated by archaeologists was a businesswomen's club that would have been thriving at the time of our story. Her wealth makes Lydia an odd candidate for the title, “uppity woman.”

But Lydia's financial assets would have been offset by some liabilities. Remember, the story is set, not in her native Thyatira, but in Philippi, capital of Græcian Macedonia. The Greeks and the inhabitants of what is now Turkey were ancient enemies – think of the Trojan War – so Lydia, for all her wealth, likely would have been held suspect by some of her neighbors. She was a foreigner and, worse, she was from one of the countries to the east with which the Greeks had fought in their glory days.

She was also out of the norm when it came to religion. Luke describes her as “a worshipper of God,” a category of Gentile adherents to Judaism. That, in fact, is how Paul, Silas, and Luke met her. She was involved in a sabbath day prayer meeting outside the gate of the city, down by the river. In their commentary on Acts, Bruce Barton and Grant Osborne report, “inscribed on the arches outside the city of Philippi was a prohibition against bringing an unrecognized religion into the city. This may explain why there was a Jewish prayer meeting being held outside the city, on the riverbank.” The good folk of the Græco-Roman world were often suspicious of Jews, as they later would be of Christians, and referred to them as “atheists,” not because they believed in no god but because they believed in only one. This was considered insulting to the cultures and religions of the people among whom the Jews had settled. So, while Lydia probably had the respect of some of her neighbors for her wealth and business acumen, they likely would have never let her forget that she was “other.”

With those liabilities in mind, it seems to me perfectly appropriate to name Lydia's actions following her first meeting with Paul as uppity. She, a Gentile woman, albeit a God-fearing and baptized one, insisted that Paul and his friends stay at her house. That would have been a bit of a reach for the former Pharisee, but he acquiesced. As a result, her home became the meeting place for the new church, despite the Philippian regulation that unrecognized religions be sequestered outside the city walls. And finally, when Paul and Silas had been released from

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prison after the earthquake and conversion of the jailer and his family, it was Lydia who took them in again. I'm quite sure she set the tongues to wagging in her neighborhood.

Who do we know today who is like Lydia? In my life as a Baptist, I've heard many women in the church compared to her. Usually, they were the leaders of the Women's Missionary Union, the SBC equivalent to AB Women in ABC life. Or they were the hostesses of the church, the women who could be counted on to organize the potlucks and the showers and the teas. But as I think more about Lydia, I think we should look for her counterparts in the women who come to us as immigrants and set about making themselves a part of the local church. I think today's Lydias are the ones who set tongues wagging by ministering to the homeless and the hungry from their own resources. Today's Lydias are the women who stand up for those who've experienced injustice. Who do we know on this Mother's Day who deserves the title of Lydia?

The other woman in this morning's scripture has quite a different story and, again, there may be some question about her status as "uppity." Paul and Silas' prison stay in Philippi is brought about by their interaction with a slave girl. It's worth a little digging into Luke's Greek to discover some things about her. The Greek used to describe her is not that used of a mature woman but of a pre-adolescent girl, a "tween" in modern parlance. Luke describes her also as one who "had a spirit of divination." The exact term is *pneuma pythonos*, the spirit of a python. Unpacking that requires a brief excursion into Greek mythology. According to the ancient story, the god Apollo killed the massive snake god Python, the child of the earth goddess Gaea, at Delphi. A temple to Apollo was then built at Delphi and the high priestess there, who was always thought to have the power to see the future, was called the Pythia, in memory of the snake god killed by Apollo. These Pythian oracles usually delivered their predictions in cryptic pronouncements, capable of any number of interpretations, which of course meant that if you couldn't exactly prove that they were right, you couldn't really prove that they were wrong, either.

But no matter how mysterious her utterances may have been otherwise, the young prophet was quite clear in identifying Paul and companions as "slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She was persistent and loud, as well as clear, and eventually Paul, not a warm and cuddly type at the best of times, got fed up. He cast out the spirit in the name of Christ and, apparently, she never prophesied again.

As in all Biblical stories of demonic possession, there's a question for us as to what was really going on here. Was this kid simply bright, observant, and forthright, able to tell her masters' clients things about themselves they thought were hidden? Was she, in fact, possessed by a spirit? At any rate, her actions toward Paul were guaranteed to be provocative, whether through angering her polytheistic neighbors by proclaiming that the God Paul followed was "the Most High God," or by ignoring her masters' legitimate, paying customers by focusing on Paul. Whether she was in control of her actions or not, she certainly comes off as uppity.

But after she serves as the catalyst for the rest of Paul's Philippian adventures, she disappears from the story. There are, as far as I could find, no legends about her life after that point. She was, after all, just a slave girl, one of the most disposable human assets in that time. When she lost her ability to make money for them, it's unlikely that her masters would have simply set her

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free. She might have been a disposable asset, but she was an asset. Men who are more interested in money than in human lives have always been able to find economically viable uses for an adolescent girl. They may have pimped her out. They may have simply made her an ordinary household slave. We would not find either option particularly appealing. I was moved by a series of questions about this child asked in her commentary on this story by Rev. Dr. Janet Hunt, pastor of First Lutheran Church of DeKalb, Illinois:

“I wonder, for instance when her 'spirit of divination' was first discovered. Was it something she always had or did it only become apparent when she was a little older? I wonder how it was that she was sold into slavery. Did the certainty that she was 'possessed' by something frighten her family and as a result, were they at least a little bit relieved to see her go? Or was their financial situation desperate and so they sold her in order to benefit from whatever the 'going rate' was for girls such as her? Oh, I would imagine that in that time and place it must have been her father's decision to sell her in this way and I wonder if her mother grieved this always. Or perhaps her father did this at her mother's urging. Or maybe her parents had both died and she had no other way of supporting herself except for this unthinkable way. Or maybe slavery was simply a generations old reality for her family and her particular ability simply made her valuable in a different way to those who owned her. And I wonder what her life was like as a 'slave.' Did her owners only take advantage of her seemingly supernatural ability to discern the truth or was there more to her enslavement? This certainly was bad enough, but it could have been more and perhaps was. I wonder all these things because mostly I wonder what became of her next. Once she was freed from that which so benefited her owners, did they actually let her go or did they keep her for other purposes? And if they did set her free, was she able to return home? And if she did return home, was she welcomed there? Was she able to return to any semblance of a normal life? Or was she forever damaged, forever changed by the experience of having been sold into slavery and living as such for who knows how long?”

I'd like to think that, slave or free, she was welcomed into the fellowship at Lydia's house on the sabbath day. I'd like to think that she lived a long, if hard life, was allowed to marry and have children, and that she told her sons and daughters about her experience with the “slaves of the Most High God” and how she herself had found salvation. I'd like to think that, but I just don't know.

And that begs the question, who do we know who is like the snake-girl? To the shame of our “enlightened” world, young girls continue to be kept in slavery, sold by their parents, or kidnapped and taken far away to work as household servants, sweatshop labor, or worse. Young girls, mature women, men of all ages continue to struggle with mental health issues that may look very much like possession, everything from drug addiction to schizophrenia. The poor and the powerless in our society continue to be used like disposable assets by business people and politicians for whom the ability to make the money they want to make is far more important than the health and lives of those who do the work that makes their money. All of these are just like Luke's Pythian damsel. Who do we know who is like the snake-girl?

And so, my friends, on this Mother's Day, we give thanks for the strong women in our lives, for the nurturing women in our lives, for the uppity women in our lives. But let us not forget that women are still underpaid in comparison to men, that women are still enslaved, that women are

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still in danger. Because the highest tribute that we can pay to our mothers is to work to ensure that all women are held in as high regard as we hold our loved ones. And wherever women still suffer injustice, we must be as uppity as Moses to say to the modern Pharaohs, "Let My People Go." Thanks be to God. Amen.