

Things are not always as they seem

Acts 16:9-15

May 9, 2010

Whom do you have to thank for the fact that you are sitting here in church today eager to worship God and to hear more of the good news about Jesus?

The Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit has been the driving force behind the spread of the gospel throughout the world. It is the Holy Spirit that has inspired and guided and empowered the followers of Jesus from the beginning, pushing them and prodding them and redirecting them as they took the message of Jesus' resurrection well beyond the confines of Jerusalem.

We heard last week how the Holy Spirit brought Peter to Caesarea to Cornelius' house. There the Spirit showed Peter and all of them present that day that the good news about Jesus was for Gentiles, too.

The Holy Spirit chose Paul and directed him and his companions as they spread the good news about Jesus to Jews and to Gentiles throughout the eastern Mediterranean. They started from Antioch in Syria, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians. They sailed to Cyprus and then visited several towns in the province of Asia, before returning to Antioch.

They left Antioch a second time and traveled throughout Asia, reaching its westernmost city, Troas. Then they went further! They crossed the Aegean Sea into Europe for the first time, visiting the province of Macedonia in northern Greece. Eventually, they preached the good news about Jesus throughout Greece, in Thessalonica and Corinth and Athens.

Later Paul and those who came after him brought the gospel to Rome and then to the rest of Italy, to France and the British Isles, and one day, across the Atlantic to the Americas ... and to you! So you may thank the Holy Spirit that the gospel of Jesus is being preached today in Waterloo, Iowa!

This is only one small part of the whole story, the part of the story that tells about the spread of the gospel to the north and to the west. But a most important step in this part of the story came when Paul and his companions crossed the Aegean, when the gospel first came to Europe. Here's how Luke tells the story ...

That night Paul had a vision in which he saw a Macedonian standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" As soon as Paul had this vision, we got ready to leave for Macedonia, because we decided that God had called us to preach the Good News to the people there.

Paul had a vision and as soon as he did, they all got ready to leave for Macedonia. Luke remembers,

We decided that God had called us to preach the Good News to the people there.

“We” decided? Paul had a vision and “we” decided? I don’t think so! It sounds like Paul decided. But, in any case, it was the Holy Spirit leading them across the sea. And it all happened because of a vision.

I want you to try to visualize what Paul saw in his vision. Imagine the scene. Imagine the Macedonian standing, begging him to come. What does the Macedonian look like? What is the Macedonian doing? What do you see?

How many of you visualized the Macedonian as a man? How many of you visualized a woman? Things are not always as they seem! It was a woman to whom the Spirit led Paul and his companions!

We left by ship from Troas and sailed straight across to Samothrace, and the next day to Neapolis. From there we went inland to Philippi, a city of the first district of Macedonia; it is also a Roman colony. We spent several days there. On the Sabbath we went out of the city to the riverside, where we thought there would be a place where Jews gathered for prayer. We sat down and talked to the women who gathered there. One of those who heard us was Lydia from Thyatira, who was a dealer in purple cloth. She was a woman who worshipped God, and the Lord opened her mind to pay attention to what Paul was saying. After she and the people of her house had been baptized, she invited us, “Come and stay in my house if you have decided that I am a true believer in the Lord.” And she persuaded us to go.

The first Christian in Europe was a woman! Who was the first person to see the resurrected Jesus? Mary, a woman.

Who was the first Christian convert in Europe? Lydia, a woman.

Hmmm ... We may have a problem.

The moderator of our church, the lay leader of our congregation, is a woman: Shelli Panicucci.

The chair of our board of deacons, the leader of the spiritual caretakers of our congregation, is a woman: Janice Akin.

The conference minister responsible for oversight of our congregation and the other UCC congregations in Northeast Iowa is a woman: Jonna Jensen.

We may have a problem. Because, you see, our minister is a man! I came across this top ten list this week: *Top 10 Reasons Why Men Shouldn't Be Ordained*.

10. *A man's place is in the army.*

9. *For men who have children, their duties might distract them from the responsibilities of being a parent.*

8. *Their physical build indicates that men are more suited to tasks such as chopping down trees and wrestling mountain lions. It would be "unnatural" for them to do other forms of work.*

7. *Man was created before woman. It is therefore obvious that man was a prototype. Thus, they represent an experiment, rather than the crowning achievement of creation.*

6. *Men are too emotional to be priests or pastors. This is easily demonstrated by their conduct at football games and watching basketball tournaments.*

5. *Some men are handsome; they will distract women worshipers.*

4. *To be ordained pastor is to nurture the congregation. But this is not a traditional male role. Rather, throughout history, women have been considered to be not only more skilled than men at nurturing, but also more frequently attracted to it. This makes them the obvious choice for ordination.*

3. *Men are overly prone to violence. No really manly man wants to settle disputes by any means other than by fighting about it. Thus, they would be poor role models, as well as being dangerously unstable in positions of leadership.*

2. *Men can still be involved in church activities, even without being ordained. They can sweep paths, repair the church roof, change the oil in the church vans, and maybe even lead the singing on Father's Day. By confining themselves to such traditional male roles, they can still be vitally important in the life of the Church.*

1. In the New Testament account, the person who betrayed Jesus was a man. Thus, his lack of faith and ensuing punishment stands as a symbol of the subordinated position that all men should take.

So you see, we have a problem!

We laugh, in large part, because of the irony. Change a few words, a few references, here and there, change “man” to “woman,” and you have a good list of the actual reasons used for generations to disqualify women for leadership in the church.

It is ironic that a church that claims “there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, between slaves and free people, between men and women,” rather than “we are all one in union with Christ Jesus” -- it is ironic that such a church should have for so much of its history kept women “in their place” and outside the circles of power, consigning them instead to the margins of community life. Actually it is a double irony! It has taken so long and women have had to fight so hard to attain the kind of recognition and respect and status in the church ... that they had at the beginning!

Consider Lydia, the first Christian in Europe, the head of the first gathered community of followers of Jesus in Europe, in other words, the first church leader!

She was a businesswoman, a dealer in fine textiles, apparently a successful businesswoman.

She was an emigré, resettling in Europe, in Philippi, after leaving her home in Thyatira, in Asia, a well-known center for the textile trade, probably moving for business reasons.

She was the head of her household, a household that included perhaps other family members or servants or business associates.

She was gracious and assertive. Luke says she persuaded them to come and stay with her.

And she was, according to some commentators, a widow. A widow? Why make that assumption? Is it impossible to think she could not have arrived at her station in life on her own? There is no suggestion at all in the biblical record that she was a widow. She may or may not have been a widow. Regardless, her character and competence and achievements stand on their own merits.

Now it is true that women of that day had few independent rights and were often treated, at best, as second class citizens. All of which makes Jesus' attitude toward women and treatment of women truly remarkable. All of which makes Paul's attitude toward women and treatment of women truly remarkable, aside from a few stray quotes that opponents of women in leadership have been eager to seize upon.

The story of the spread of the gospel, the story of the movement of God's Holy Spirit, tells it best, straightforwardly reporting the vital role of women in the church from its beginning. And one of those women, vital to the early growth of the church, vital to the existence of our church, was Lydia.

There is one more irony to report about Lydia. Paul saw the vision of a Macedonian saying, "Come, help us!," but, in many ways, it was Lydia who helped them! She provided a place to stay for Paul and his companions when they first came to Philippi. She provided her house as a gathering place for all the new believers. And later, after Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, she provided hospitality to them once more upon their release.

That's Lydia's story, the story of the first Christian in Europe. Do we still have Lydias in our churches and are they treated with the same level of respect?

We certainly do have Lydias in our churches, strong and capable women, gracious and confident women. And it seems that our churches and our societies are finally acknowledging and encouraging the leadership gifts of such women. But things are not always as they seem.

In its one hundred and fifty-three history, our church has never been served by a woman pastor, other than the brief tenure of a female associate just before I was called. And as late as the beginning of my ministry among you, women were permitted to prepare communion, but not to serve it. The roles of deacon and deaconness were kept carefully separated.

We live in a nation committed to human rights, to equal opportunity for all persons, to equal and fair treatment regardless of race or creed or gender. And yet, despite our affirmation of freedom of religion, no Roman Catholic was elected president until 1960, almost two hundred years after our nation's birth. And despite the emancipation of African-American slaves and the gains of the civil rights movement, no non-white president was elected in this country until 2008. And despite universal suffrage, and the growth in the number of women in public service, we have yet to elect a female president.

And the status of women worldwide is still second class. Consider these facts reported by the United Nations and by the Global Fund for Women ...

- *Women have not achieved equality with men in any country.*
- *The majority of women earn on average about three-fourths of the pay of males for the same work.*
- *Of the world's 1.3 billion poor people, it is estimated that nearly 70 per cent are women.*
- *Between 75 and 80 per cent of the world's 27 million refugees are women and children.*
- *Only 28 women [were] elected heads of state or government in [the 20th] century.*
- *Women hold 11.7 per cent of the seats in the world's parliaments.*
- *Of the world's nearly one billion illiterate adults, two-thirds are women.*
- *The primary victims of today's wars are civilian women and their children, not soldiers.*
- *Gender-based violence against women -- female infanticide, sexual trafficking and exploitation, dowry killings and domestic violence -- causes more death and disability among women in the 15 to 44 age group than cancer, malaria, traffic accidents and war combined.*
- *Up to 47 percent of women report that their first sexual intercourse was forced.*
- *In 2003, at least 54 countries had discriminatory laws against women.*
- *Some countries still do not have universal suffrage. Among them are Brunei, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.*
- *Only 1 percent of the world's assets are in the name of women.*
- *More than \$7 trillion worth of women's work goes unpaid.*
- *2.1 billion women live on less than \$2 a day, and 330 million women live on less than \$1 a day.*

We have a lot of work still to do. We have a lot of work still to do, because the gospel concerns women. The status of women is not the whole gospel, by any means, but the gospel includes the status of women ...

... because Jesus' way is the way of reconciliation, reconciliation between people and peoples set against each other;

... because Jesus' way is the way of wholeness, restoring to all people, men and women, dignity and respect and usefulness;

... because Jesus' way is the way of justice, lifting up those who are poor or humble or marginalized and bringing down those who are rich or proud.

This is Jesus' way and Jesus himself shows us the way by the way he treated women: the Samaritan woman by the well, the Canaanite woman with a sick daughter, Mary and Martha, Mary Magdalene, his mother.

Jesus honored his mother, not just because she was his mother, but as a woman, a woman created in God's image, a woman given equal share in the responsibility and the glory of being human.

On this mother's day, may we do the same. As we honor our mothers, may we honor all women, too, as persons made to bear God's image, as sisters in the faith, as equal partners in the work of the Kingdom, as one with us in Christ. And may we follow the lead of the Holy Spirit as we seek to make sure that honor is not just empty words, but a matter of fact.