

God is Opening Your Heart

Acts 16:11-15

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One night in 1916, six-year old Ruby Haney was dressed in a red corduroy coat that her father purchased to keep her warm and escorted down to a boat ramp on the Rappahannock, River at Fredricksburg, Virginia. A few weeks earlier, Ruby's mother had died from Typhoid Fever and her father had arranged for Ruby and each of her three brothers to be taken in by four different families in the Virginia country side.

Ruby was farmed out to a family in Port Conway, several miles down river from Fredericksburg. Rather than take her to the family himself, Ruby's father paid for a boatman to transport his only daughter down river to the Gray family who awaited her in Port Conway. Ruby, in her red corduroy coat, mournfully waved good bye to her father on shore, climbed up in the lap of the captain of the boat and floated down to her new home.

Later that night, the boat arrived in Port Conway and Ruby rode in a horse and buggy to the Gray's farm. Ruby thought she was going there to find a place of shelter and stability. She found that, but she also found something more. After living with the Gray family for a short time, Mr. Gray, a sixty-year old man who had been a tremendous source of comfort to Ruby, died of a heart attack. This additional loss pushed Ruby over the edge of what she could withstand emotionally. She wept every night and feared that she would never be happy again.

After her husband died, Mrs. Gray decided it was time to get her family in church. The next Sunday, she took her son Clyde and Ruby to the Shiloh Baptist Church of Port Conway. It was there, that young Ruby found a Sunday School teacher who truly listened to her sorrow, anger and confusion. The woman befriended Ruby and eventually told her about Jesus Christ. When Ruby heard of the one who had died to save her from her sins and risen again to be her Lord, she practically ran down the aisle to profess her faith in Jesus. She was baptized in a small pond near the church and began a lifetime of devotion to Christ. Every night after her salvation, Ruby sat in her room and prayed to Jesus. As she learned to read, she added a passage of Scripture to her bed time ritual. She followed that same habit for the rest of her 99 years. Ruby said that after meeting the Lord, she never again felt overcome with grief. Christ became her constant companion, seeing her through the years of mistreatment and abuse she suffered as a child, years of working in a sweatshop as an early adolescent, the death of her oldest child at 21, bouts with cancer and many other challenges.

Ruby thought she was going to Port Conway to find a home, instead, she found a Savior. Many times in life, the reasons we go somewhere are not nearly as important as what we find when we get there.

We don't know why Lydia attended a prayer group that met down by the Gangites, River outside of Phillipi in Macedonia. She might have headed down by the riverside for commercial reasons. Lydia was from the city of Thyatira in what is now Turkey. Thyatira was famous for a purple die that was made there from madder root. You can still buy madder root for the purpose of dying cloth its reddish-purple color.

Acts tells us that Lydia sold cloth died with the special purple color from Thyatira. She would have been something like a regional salesperson, relocated from her home city to Philippi to expand sales of the unique fabric in that area of the world.

If you were a woman in a foreign city, hoping to sell a new line of purple fabric, where would you go? Surely to the agora or marketplace, but that would be a fairly impersonal way to ply your trade. What if you heard that on Saturdays, a group of women met down by the river to socialize, swap stories and pray to their god. A savvy saleswoman would certainly check the gathering out for potential customers. Maybe that is why Lydia went down to the riverside. Of course the reason she went is not nearly as important as what she found when she arrived there.

Perhaps she went down to the riverside because she was lonely. The Scripture tells us that Lydia had some wealth. She had a home and a household which indicates she had servants. It is unlikely that Lydia was married. There is no mention of a husband or children in this story and certainly Luke would have told us of their existence had they have been in the picture.

We are left with an image of a fairly prosperous business woman, over four days journey from her family of origin, alone in a bustling Roman colony. Likely she did long for something more than business relationships. News of a gathering of women who met each Saturday down by the river to socialize, swap stories and pray, without the intrusion or interruption of menfolk, would have surely appealed to Lydia. So maybe it was a desire for friendship that took Lydia down to the river. Of course the reason she went is not nearly as important as what she found when she arrived there.

Those who know the culture of that time period wonder if there were not more painful reasons that drove Lydia down to the river to pray. It was almost unprecedented in that time for an unmarried woman to leave her home and move to another city at such a distance from her birthplace. What could have caused such a risky undertaking? Had she suffered a major heartbreak or loss in Thyatira and wanted to leave that all behind? Had she committed some embarrassing sin and left town in the hopes of leaving her shame behind? Was she driven from her hometown because of some disgrace? Was she invited to Philippi by a suitor who turned out to be a cad and left her without support in a foreign town? If any of these were realities in her life, then she went down to the river in hopes of finding a person of faith who could help her deal with her pain. Of course the reason she went is not nearly as important as what she found when she arrived there.

Some commentators note that Lydia might have been part of such a group in her home town of Thyatira before she moved to Philippi. Luke called Lydia a worshiper of God which means she believed in God, but had not converted to any formal religion. There is a lot of evidence that Thyatira had a Jewish synagogue during Lydia's lifetime, so maybe she had found significant relationships with Jewish people of faith in her young adult years. If so, then it makes sense that once she was settled in Philippi, she sought out a similar group. Maybe she went down to the river to pray, therefore, hoping to find a group like she had known in Thyatira, a group that could help her continue her search for God. Of course the reason she went is not nearly as important as what she found when she arrived there.

People show up in church for all sorts of reasons. Once in a while folks still come because they are salespeople and those who trained them taught them that relationships formed in church can lead to commerce. Some come looking for friends after moving to a new location. Some hope to find a romantic relationship and are tired of looking for such at parties and singles' bars. Many people attend church because they belonged to one somewhere else and hope to establish a similar relationship with a congregation in their new place of residency. Some come for the preacher, some for the music, some seeking help with a problem and some come just to please their mothers on Mother's Day. Of course, the reasons folks come to church are not nearly as important as what they find when they get here.

We know why Luke and the apostle Paul went down to the riverside. They were on a mission from God to proclaim the news about Jesus Christ throughout the Mediterranean world. A few days before their encounter with Lydia, they had intended to go to Bithynia, a small town in modern Turkey, but, Luke reports, the Spirit of Christ

prevented them. The next night Paul had a vision in which a man from northern Greece pled with him to come to Macedonia. Luke wrote, "When we had seen the vision, we immediately crossed over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them." Two days later, they arrived in Phillipi and decided they were to spread the gospel in the Roman colony. All week long, they preached the good news about Jesus in the streets, but when Saturday came, they decided to take their message to the riverside, where they presumed they would find the few Jews living in that region gathered for prayer.

When they arrived at the place of prayer, Paul and Luke were no doubt thrown off balance a bit to find a group of women, both gentiles and Jews, sitting along the bank, praying together. Before his conversion, Paul would have never sat with a bunch of women in the hopes of having a spiritual conversation, but by that point, he was quite aware that God had called him to a new way of life, so he sat down with the woman and spoke with them. The Greek is clear that Paul did not address the women or lecture the women or even preach to the women. He sat down and conversed with them.

Conversation requires talking and listening. Most of us do better at talking than we do listening. John Savage is a Methodist minister who has devoted his career to helping Christians learn to listen. He says that in general, we are horrible at it. Our problem, according to the communications specialist, is that we don't use the lag time in a conversation properly. All of our minds can handle more input than the words of a conversation. The extra room in our brains provides lag time or time to think about other things while someone is talking. You are using your lag time right now to hear me, but to also think about a host of other things.

Savage says that when someone starts speaking to us, we often use our lag time to think about what we are going to say in response. For instance, as the new acquaintance tells us her name, we're thinking about what question we might ask next and miss the name entirely. John Savage advises that the next time we ask someone his or her name, we should focus our rambling brains on the answer. He promises that we will have plenty of time to form our next nugget of witty repartee after we receive and store the person's name.

Another skill Savage teaches in his listening clinics is how to use our own stories. The pastor says that usually when someone begins to talk to us about an upcoming operation, our minds immediately go to the procedures we've had. Our lag time is expended mentally rehearsing our own story so that we miss the important pieces of the story being told to us. Most people, Savage says, won't even allow the talker to finish her story before jumping in to tell his own. "You think having your gall bladder removed is tough, try having open heart surgery." Then we're off and running on our own story. "You say your husband left you? I'll never forget the day my husband left me, why it was fourteen years ago" and off we go. "You lost your job? No kidding. My job stinks. My boss is a jerk. Why just last week. ."

To improve our listening skills, Savage suggests that the next time someone launches off on a story, we use our lag time to remember how we felt when we experienced a similar circumstance. But then, rather than jump in to tell our story, the listening expert says we should ask the speaker to share his or her own emotions. "Draw out their story," Savage says, "don't stomp on it with your own." When listening to a mother tell of her miscarriage, don't tromp in with your heartbreaking story, simply reflect on how you felt and ask the mother to tell you more about her sense of loss, anger or disappointment. When listening to a man speak of his father's death, don't obstruct the conversation immediately with your own grief story, get in touch with how you felt and then invite the speaker to tell you more about his sorrow, emptiness, frustration or relief.

John Savage says the reason the church isn't more successful in helping people come to faith in Christ is because we're always so busy talking to people that we never listen closely enough to hear what God is doing in their lives. Only by listening to what God is already doing in people's lives, Savage teaches, can we help them interpret this holy activity and lead them to Christ.

Paul sat down and listened and by doing so was able to hear evidence that the Lord was opening Lydia's heart to the gospel. We don't know what she told him. Maybe she spoke of her loneliness, maybe she related how empty she felt even with a good job, nice home and a certain amount of prestige. Perhaps she talked about a constant feeling that she had inside that God was trying to tell her something. Possibly she poured out her heart to Paul concerning the heartbreaks and mistakes of Thyatira.

Whatever she told him, Paul recognized that the Lord was moving in her life and was able to help her interpret the Spirit's touch and lead her to faith in Christ. Lydia was baptized that very day and began her new life with Christ. Although many motivations might have taken her to the riverside that day, what was important was that due to the faithfulness and alertness of Paul, she met Christ once she got there.

Who has been talking to you lately? Have you been listening, really listening? Maybe they came to see you for business reasons or maybe their children play with yours. Perhaps they've been dropping by to talk about gardening or sports or medical issues. Possibly they've run into you a few times at the grocery store and initiated a conversation. It is not important why they came to see you, what's important is what they found when they arrived. For although all sorts of reasons drive people to speak to us, we have been sent into this world with a mission. A mission from God, to listen, to listen and listen some more. Once we've heard enough to see the hand of God in that person's life, we have the wondrous privilege of helping that person understand that what he or she is experiencing is the loving touch of God and a true encounter with the risen Lord. We get to be the ones who can say, God is opening your heart, invite the Lord in and begin your new life today.