

## The Fabric of Faith

Acts 16:9-15

May 9, 2021 Mother's Day

Today is Mother's Day – a time to give thanks for our mothers and to reflect upon the spiritual gifts God has imparted through the special women in our life, and to learn about a woman in the bible whose life was literally "the fabric of faith."

The roots of Mothers' Day began in rural West Virginia – my home state – as a social change movement. Anna Reeves Jarvis, an Appalachian homemaker, organized a day to raise awareness of poor health conditions in her community, a cause she believed would be best advocated by mothers.

She called it "Mother's Work Day." Everyday is a workday for mothers, as every mother knows! Mother's Day is supposed to be a day off! Anyway, Anna Jarvis continued organizing throughout the years of the Civil War, working with women on both sides of the conflict to encourage better care for all the wounded, and later working for reconciliation between Union and Confederate neighbors.

Fifteen years later, Julia Ward Howe, a Boston poet, pacifist, suffragist, and author of the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation" calling for a "Mothers' Day for Peace," to work for peace and disarmament.

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Now fast forward to our own mothers today. Shortly after Cynthia and I were married, we were reflecting upon what our mothers had taught us, particularly about food. My parents owned a bakery, and my mother was the chief baker. Every morning brought the smell of fresh baked bread, donuts in the kettle, and a host of other heavenly aromas that wafted up to our apartment above.

Cynthia's mother, on the other hand, was a dietician. Her mother would say, "Have a little green salad every night with dinner, honey!" My mother would say, "Have more bread!" "Enjoy dessert!" I suppose that could have sparked a bit of a heated debate! It probably helped that our families lived on different coasts. As you can imagine, we got slightly different messages from our mothers about food. Now just between you and me, I think I got the sweeter part of the deal!

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We cannot deny that our mothers and grandmothers have had a tremendous influence on who we are and what we believed as we grow up. In turn, we pass those messages on to our own children and grandchildren. If you were to ask a group of people about who was formative in their faith, or first introduced them to Christ, the vast majority would answer, "My mother or grandmother first brought me to the faith."

What did you learn from your mother? What lessons do you need to hold onto? And what do you need to let go of in order to move on with your life? What did you learn about love? About how you deal with life when it is hard? And what did she teach you about death and grief? What did you pray for? If you are a mother, what lessons did you teach your children by your words and actions?

I certainly wouldn't be serving God today if it were not for my own mother and grandmother, who made sure every Sunday that I attended Sunday School, and she personally walked me there herself. She shared amazing stories of faith and miracles in her own life.

I never knew a greater prayer warrior than my grandmother. Whenever an important matter arose in the family, we would take it first to "Me-Me", who laid a loving hand on us and prayed unabashedly on the spot. Right away we began to feel better, and we just knew that she was able to push those prayers right to the top of God's "to do" list.

She was a salty Christian and seasoned veteran when it came to prayer. She prayed as if her life depended on it, because quite often it did. From being rescued in a fire, to surviving many surgeries and family emergencies, prayer got her through it all. We learned to pray often from the heart thanks to the magnificent spiritual countenance of my grandmother.

It's these kinds of spiritual gifts and experiences we are celebrating today on Mother's Day. How would the Church ever survive without motherly love? Even if you are not a mother, you have a mother, and her influence has been real. In most churches across the land, the women who go to church and do the work usually outnumber the men at least 3 to 1, though the numbers may be a bit more favorable in our church.

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This morning in the book of Acts, we hear about another remarkable woman who may be a very good role model for us to look at today on Mother's Day. Her name is Lydia. You might think of her as one of the early "mothers" of the Church. If a book were to be written about her, it might be called "the fabric of faith." Lydia was the first person on the continent of Europe to become a follower of Jesus and to be baptized, and the first person to establish a house-church in Europe.

We don't know much about Lydia. She was a wealthy Gentile woman, but it wasn't always that way. Lydia likely started out in her native province of Asia Minor. She moved on to the European continent, in the part of Greece called Macedonia, in the city of Philippi – mainly a colony of retired army veterans. Lydia was once a slave, but a now free woman.

Just how she came to be free is unclear, but a number of Roman slaves had marketable skills that enabled them to buy their freedom. Lydia's skills were in the purple dye

industry, for which the region was famous. She went into the dye business on her own, as a number of other ex-slaves had done. There was a lot of money to be made in purple-dye industry, for only aristocrats could afford the best of that color.

The finest purple dye had to be gathered drop by drop from marine snails, and you needed 12,000 snails to make a gram and a half of raw dye. A pound of wool dyed with this rich purple dye would sell for about 1000 denarii in that day – an amount that takes an ordinary laborer three years to earn. A whole cloak of such material costs two to three times that amount, up to nine years of labor.

Lydia offered the very best of purple-dyed cloth, but for this former-slave-turned-business woman, this was just the beginning of her story. She was just one of many successful merchants in her day, and if this was her only attribute, we would have no reason to remember and celebrate her life today.

Luke, the author of Acts, had more in mind. Lydia had a very spiritual side to her as well. Lydia was a God-fearing woman, and was probably taught the faith by her own mother. She was a Gentile steeped in the Jewish tradition. She regularly gathered on the Jewish Sabbath with others like her -- mostly women.

She traveled about a mile west of the city, to a spot near the Gangites River that Luke calls "a place of prayer." Now the heart of the story that Luke wants to convey is this: One particular Sabbath, Lydia encountered the apostle Paul and his companions—Silas, Timothy, and perhaps Luke himself, all of whom had just arrived on the European continent after a largely disappointing missionary journey through Asia Minor.

The women welcomed Paul and his party into their prayer service. Paul was invited by them to teach. Lydia listened eagerly to Paul's preaching about Jesus. Her heart was on fire, and right then and there she accepted Jesus as the Messiah the Jewish people had expected.

Immediately she was baptized by Paul in the nearby river—she and all her household, both family and servants. As Luke tells it, Lydia and her household become the first followers of Christ on the continent of Europe.

Following her baptism, Lydia urges Paul to stay with them in Philippi, and her home quickly becomes the local house-church, and soon there is a burgeoning Christian community, consisting of every gender and social class as they gather for meals and to worship God.

Wow! What a woman! Don't you wish you had known her? Lydia used her wealth to start the first church in Philippi—a congregation which Paul loved and praised for its generosity. She helped Christian communities of the first century blaze new ground by

overcoming barriers of class, gender and ethnic background. Her influence set the tone in the congregation for years. Her plans as a seller of purple cloth were far too short-sighted for what God had in store.

The story of Lydia is a gift for all mothers and women everywhere on this Mother's Day. Because of Lydia's faithful witness and generosity, the first century Christian Church took shape. Here's to Lydia—the first mother of the Church—and to all those like her.

May her story be an inspiration to all those who have gathered at the river to tell stories of how Jesus became the fabric of their faith, and how Lydia became a spiritual mentor and mother for us all. I hope you have been blessed to have a mother or friend like Lydia on this Mother's Day, and someone who is the fabric of your faith. Amen.

### **Acts 16:9-15**

16:9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

16:10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

16:11 We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,

16:12 and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days.

16:13 On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

16:14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

16:15 When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.