

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng
May 22, 2024

“Holy Wisdom”

Feast Day of Lydia of Thyatira

Episcopal Diocese of New York, Morning Prayer
Tuesday of Proper 2, Year Two
Proverbs 4:1-27; Matthew 11:7-15

Good morning.

As many of you know, this year is the 50th anniversary of the ordination of the Philadelphia Eleven – the first women to be ordained to the priesthood in The Episcopal Church.

The ordinations that occurred in July of 1974 were originally an act of ecclesiastical disobedience. However, these ordinations ultimately showed us that the Holy Spirit moves at ground level and has the power to blow wide open the windows and the doors of our beloved church.

Tonight, by the way, is the New York City theatrical premiere of the documentary “The Philadelphia Eleven.” It will occur at 7 pm at the Firehouse Cinema in Chinatown, and there will be a special Q&A session with the film’s director as well as others, including Mother Margaret Rose.

Now one of the things that I love the most about studying scripture is that we can see the movement of the Holy Spirit not just today; not just a half-century ago – but nearly two thousand years ago.

Today, we celebrate the Feast Day of Lydia of Thyatira, a coworker of St. Paul and one of the earliest women leaders of the Jesus Movement. Around the year 50 C.E., Paul visited the Greek city of Philippi. There he met Lydia, who would become the very first Christian convert in Europe.

Although there are only three verses in the entire Bible that mention Lydia, we actually know quite a lot about her from just those three verses.

First, we know that Lydia was a wealthy business woman. The biblical text says that she was a dealer of purple cloth, which was a luxury item that only royalty and the wealthy could afford. In those days, a pound of purple dye cost as much as half a Roman soldier’s annual salary. So she was wealthy.

Second, we know that Lydia was the head of her own household. Unlike most women, she was neither under the authority of a husband nor a father. When Lydia converted to Christianity, she had the authority to have her entire household baptized – which she did. So she was powerful.

And third, we know that Lydia was extremely hospitable. She urged Paul and his companions to stay at her home, which became their base of operations in Philippi. So she was generous.

Now let's think a bit about what this meant in the context of the early church. Remember that there were no church buildings in those days. Instead, Christians prayed and broke bread together in their own homes. So Lydia, as the owner of a large home, would likely have been the de facto leader of their local community – much like a rector or a priest-in-charge today.

Like John the Baptist in today's reading from the Gospel According to St. Matthew, Lydia was a messenger who pointed not to herself, but instead to God's presence in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Lydia was also a leader who honored the presence of Holy Wisdom – *chokmah* in the Hebrew and *sophia* in the Greek – in herself and in others. As we heard in today's reading from the Book of Proverbs, “[L]ove [Wisdom] and she will guard you. . . . Prize her highly, and she will exalt you; she will honor you if you embrace her.” As someone who listened eagerly to the Good News, Lydia loved, prized, and embraced Lady Wisdom, the female personification of God's wisdom in the Bible.

As we celebrate the birthday of the church during this week after Pentecost Sunday, I invite you to give thanks for the movement of the Holy Spirit among us.

And I invite you to give thanks for the ministries of Lydia of Thyatira, the Philadelphia Eleven, and so many others who have embodied the presence of Holy Wisdom during the past two millennia.

Amen.