

Where to find the best books...Rummage Sale – I found Cokie Roberts book entitled “Founding Mothers.” I haven’t read it yet, but look forward to it, especially after hearing Cokie speak at a conference about a year ago on health care. Well behaved women seldom make history.

It’s Mother’s Day, but today, on behalf of all women, I want to talk about our Spiritual Mothers. In seminary, all students generally take a class in what is referred to as Patristics. Our early church fathers. What seems to be missing from most seminaries is a class entitled Matristics, but there have been plenty of "Mothers of the Church" throughout the centuries. Sometimes it’s good to call them out. And the lectionary provided for such a time today – and even more special on Mother’s Day. Lydia was from the city of Thyatira in present-day western Turkey. But when Paul and companions met her she was living in the Greek city of Philippi. The city of Philippi was known for the battle fought there a century before. Caesar had made the town a military base, which defined the city’s population, and many of its citizens came from elsewhere. The city worshiped Caesar as a god, and also was especially devoted to Mars, the Roman god of war.

In the context of her time, Lydia was a woman of substance who had achieved financial success through building up what must have been a thriving and lucrative business. Some scholars assert that she had been a former slave who achieves freedom and success. She is an importer of purple cloth, the imperial color of Rome worn only by the emperor and those of rank and authority. Dye for purple was made from a juice gathered drop by drop from certain marine snails. It took thousands of these crustaceans to make a yard or two of purple cloth. It was worth its weight in silver it was said. The cloth she sold was a statement of status and wealth. The costly fabric reserved for the upper class as a sign of rank. She owns a house and property, she’s got enterprise and initiative, she has access to cash and capital. She’s a strikingly modern woman, and the text treats her that way. She is not identified by any husband’s name, which even in our day is worth noticing. She has an independent character, and she apparently does not buy the established religion of the empire, even though she depends on its defenders to be her customers.

Lydia was also a former pagan who's studying to convert to Judaism, which is why the narrator calls her "a worshipper of God. She met regularly with a group of Gentile women who are attracted to the Jewish moral and ethical teaching. It seems that no synagogue existed in Philippi. Perhaps because Caesar was honored in Philippi as "Lord and God," there was no synagogue allowed. So Jewish people had to say their common prayers outside the city gates. Or it could be that it required 12 males to start a synagogue, and since they were women, they were not allowed to start one. Since they could not found a synagogue or because it was forbidden by Roman rule, they met for Sabbath prayers just outside the city walls down by the river.

Paul had come to Philippi after receiving a vision of a man urging him to cross the Aegean Sea to spread the gospel in Greece. When Paul came to this city he looked for a synagogue. It took several days before Paul and his companions found a group to preach to. And what a humble group it was. This group didn’t meet in an ornate synagogue in the city center. They met outside of town on the banks of a river for regular prayer. And ironically, considering Paul’s vision, there wasn’t a man in the bunch!

Lydia was one of the women who regularly gathered for prayer at this spot. The women welcome Paul and his party into their prayer service. Paul, as a visiting rabbi is invited by them to teach. Here Paul

found warm reception for his message of Jesus Christ, a message he did not "preach" or "argue" but rather "chatted about" with them.

Lydia listens eagerly to Paul's preaching about Jesus. When her heart is opened to what Paul and Silas says, not only does she seek to be baptized, she sees to it that her entire family is baptized. No one to consult. She becomes the first follower of Christ on the continent of Europe, the first official European convert

After her baptism Lydia exercised a radical sort of hospitality. She invited Paul and his friends to stay at her house. Luke says she prevailed upon men. She would not accept no for an answer. She would not be told that she was of the wrong race, the wrong class or the wrong gender. She was baptized and therefore equal. She offers her house for the duration of their stay in Philippi and it becomes the local house church. Lydia provides a haven for Paul after his imprisonment in verse 40.

She opens her home for nurturing the spiritual well being of others and thereby becomes a mother figure for every Christian in Philippi. Oddly, while Lydia's whole household was baptized with her, she's not described later as the leader of the house church; she somehow slips from view (as so many women do) as a leader in the early church. Lydia puts into practice an inclusive hospitality. In homes like those of Lydia and many other Christian women, the first house churches offered a foretaste of the fullness of God's reign.

We can draw from this story, and the story of so many women in the church throughout the ages, inspiration for all who open their hearts and minds and homes and, we might add, pocketbooks, for the sake of spreading the good news.

Lydia embodies the inquiring hunger of someone who senses there is more to life than what they presently, personally experience. More than money, more than success, more even than the evident measure of power and influence she enjoyed – after all, this is a woman who dealt with the most powerful and wealthy in her society, the ones who wore purple when common folk couldn't, and a woman who could decide that her whole household would be baptized? This is a woman who was willing to go beyond the boundaries set for her in a time when women were seen by many as property rather than people who owned and controlled property. When Lydia joins the other women down there by the river, this wealthy, powerful woman leaves the circles of influence and goes out to the margins of her society, joining those who undoubtedly had far less power, influence, and wealth than she did.

The story of Lydia is a story about the early church, about mission, about hospitality, community, and, of course, the experience of women in the church, often at its edges but never without impact. This foretaste exists because of the faithful witness of women like Lydia. For her boldness and openness to faith, for her all inclusive love. Here's to Lydia and all women like her; bold and faithful women; Coretta Scott King, Golda Meir, Rosa Parks, Anne Frank, Mother Theresa, Helen Keller, Joan of Arc, Dorothy Day. On mother's day these are women to remember, strong women, women of faith and purpose, bold women to whom we owe so much. They are our spiritual mothers.
"If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home."