

This Culture of Generosity by Marjory Zoet Bankson

Scriptures:

Acts 16:9-15 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. 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.

John 14:23-29 Jesus answered, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them... But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

I have always been intrigued by the story of Lydia, which we read today from the Book of Acts. We don't know a lot about her—only that she lived in Philippi and came from Thyatira, where the main commercial enterprise was making and selling purple dye. We also know that she was a single woman—head of her household in Philippi, the gateway to Europe from Asia Minor. And we know that she was not Jewish, but that she worshiped one God, rather than many.

We find Lydia (with some other friends) outside of the city, by the mighty river that flowed by Philippi into the Gulf of Neapolis, in modern Turkey. We know she was a "god-fearer." We can guess that she worshiped the Divine Source of Creation—the

same God that Jews worshiped— which she found in nature, rather than some Roman temple. We can also make some other guesses about Lydia—that she was wealthy, successful and searching for meaning beyond what her money could buy. Her thirst for knowledge is clear from her invitation to Paul and Silas, to come and stay (If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home). This was no casual invitation to "drop by and see me some time." Middle-eastern hospitality meant that they might be staying weeks or even months. She seemed prepared for that, eager even.

I don't image that Lydia anticipated the trouble Paul might cause her, but she might have. It didn't take long for Paul and Silas to land in jail because they healed a slave girl and her owners pressed charges against them. When an earthquake banged open the gates of the prison, they didn't run away—and their Roman jailer was converted. Then Paul stirred the pot some more by demanding his rights as a Roman citizen and refusing to slink out of town to save face for the Roman authorities. All in all, Paul was a very disruptive guest. Then, the story in Acts concludes, Paul returned to the little church he had started at Lydia's house, to bid them farewell, leaving Lydia in charge.

If I were standing in Lydia's shoes at that moment, I would have been HORRIFIED! Her customers and the city officials now knew that she was associated with Paul, who had been charged with illegal religious practices. What resources did she have to offer, other than her native wit and the small community which had gathered around Paul? Our Gospel reading for today captures a message that Lydia might have heard directly from Paul—that she could rely on the Holy Spirit, the Advocate and Counselor:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them...But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will

send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

That might have been cold comfort as Paul left Lydia's house, but we do know from the Book of Philippians, written to the church at Philippi, that the community not only survived, but it thrived with Lydia's faithful leadership. We don't know the details, but if we were to take the time, I'm sure we could make some guesses about the struggles in that little church over where to spend their resources and how to bear witness in the world. As Paul says in Philippians, they were to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling." It was an ongoing process, not a "done deal."

I suspect Paul is referring to the communal decisions that every little church has to make when grappling with what it means to follow Jesus in this world that God loves so much. It's one thing to worship the God of all creation—to sit by the river and pray, lost in wonder and awe at the everyday miracles we see in nature. It's quite another thing to follow Jesus in the realm of human affairs.

Last week, Anna quoted a poem by Rumi, inviting us to the "field beyond right and wrong." To me, that's the realm of God, the geography of creation, the territory I touch on silent retreat and in my morning walks. But when Paul spoke to Lydia's open heart, he was inviting her to acknowledge Jesus as her Lord, to wrestle with the situations of evil and injustice in this world, where Jesus spoke truth to power—and lost his life for it. That IS the field of right and wrong, where each of us lives as well. Paul dealt with those institutional forces over and over.

I hope you will go home and read the four chapters of Philippians, paying attention to the TONE of Paul's letter as much as to his words. Paul tells them that he is in prison,

able to give thanks for life OR death, whichever is to be his lot. He exhorts them to be faithful, to work out their salvation "with fear and trembling," and to be alert for agitators. Above all though, Philippians is a love letter—a letter of thanks and praise for the support they have given him for his mission work. Here is one little piece from chapter 4:

You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.

With that same spirit of thankfulness, I want to bear witness to the Spirit of Generosity that has marked Seekers from the very beginning. Many of you know that I've spent the last year swimming in details from the 30-year history of Seekers. I'm coming close to integrating the feedback that many of you gave me after I offered the "first edition" last December, but that's not what I want to speak of today. I want to speak about the work of the Holy Spirit in Seekers.

When Seekers began in 1976, the Stewards (who were called Members then) pledged to tithe on their gross incomes in order to support the first budget of Seekers. There were 19 original Stewards, and a budget of \$25,000—barely more than \$1,000 apiece. By the end of the first year, they had a better idea of the amount of money and effort it would take to thrive.

By 1977, Seekers had only 15 Stewards and about 35 adults in the congregation. What would you expect their budget response to be? To lower the budget? No! They raised the amount of expected income by a third; allocated 25% for our worship space; and split the rest between "inreach" and "outreach"—at 37% each. That became the pattern—known as the "50-50 rule." Inreach included 2 part-time staff salaries and expenses for encouraging community life. Outreach included domestic and

international giving. As a community, we wanted to give away the same amount as we spent on ourselves, even if we couldn't do that as individuals. Some couldn't tithe—they lived too close to the bone. Others gave generously of their wealth. We all gave "proportionately," depending on our sense of freedom with money. Also, our paid staff served out of call—not because of the amount we paid them.

One of the real fears that stalked Seekers when we were considering whether to buy this property and renovate it, was whether it would swallow up our joy, turn us into penny-pinchers or worse, saddle us with unmanageable debt. Money became a measure of our fears.

But as we lived into our fears, one step at a time, for ten long years between the decision to move and arrival in this place, financial support at Seekers continued to grow. It was a sign that the Holy Spirit was at work—that the Advocate continued to operate, bringing us hope and courage that we could continue to be generous in our support of the missions that mattered because one or another of us was directly involved. That was always the guiding principle—our money followed someone's passion, commitment and energy. Love did cast out fear as, week by week, we made decisions about giving in the privacy of our hearts. The culture of generosity is made of many parts—money, time, energy, optimism, questions, even resistance. But today, I want to focus on money.

Today, our operating budget is much larger than it was in 1977, although the number of Stewards and Members is about the same. In the 2007 budget, our planned expenses are \$254,000. Of that, external giving is the single largest item, at 32%. Inreach is next, with 30% of the budget. Debt service (to pay back the loans made to renovate this space) accounts for 27% of the budget, and building operations account for 11%.

Just as the little church at Philippi sent money to Paul when he needed it, so we have sent money along with our people to

the places where God's call takes us—here in this city, and beyond. We haven't poured our money into a single ministry. And we haven't given our money to individuals, to spend as they wished. Instead, over the years, we have developed some guidelines for giving that were designed to address systemic injustice at home and abroad.

After church today, there is a meeting to allocate funds for domestic giving. It is open to all and anyone can vote. Because of that, I want to focus on external giving—32% of our planned expenses—up by \$10,000 over last year. And that doesn't count a new line-item of \$5,000 for Dayspring or giving earmarked for Bokamoso. In 1989, the international giving group developed these guidelines. Seekers money would be spent—

to support sustainable development;

to benefit women and children;

in a place of direct Seekers involvement;

go to an organization rather than an individual (Christian if possible).

In practice, those guidelines steered our domestic giving as well. We recognized how often women and children are left out of development funding, so we directed our efforts there—not as charity, but for sustainable development. And that's as close to giving a Mother's Day sermon as I'm going to get.

Two years ago, after we moved to this location, Stewards decided to open the process of making final decisions about allocating money for external giving. We had always solicited requests for money from anyone in the congregation, but until two years ago, it was the Stewards who voted. Stewards thought that involvement in making these financial decisions would give us all a chance to care, to hear the passion of those who are involved in each recipient organization. Right now, the

back bulletin board has letters from Bokamoso scholarship students who receive earmarked funding that doesn't even show up in the budget. Next month, we will feature domestic giving recipients—once we've decided who they will be and how much they will receive.

Deciding where our domestic giving will go this year is a chance to practice stewardship together, to celebrate God's abundance and love for others as a whole community. This year we will be allocating \$51,000 for domestic recipients—more than many of us make in a year. The international portion has already been allocated.

Let me conclude with these words from Paul—and an invitation to stay after coffee to help us decide where our funds for domestic giving will go in 2007. Paul writes to the church at Philippi:

...I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

The meeting today is an opportunity to practice generosity—just as Lydia's church did for Paul's mission and call. It's something we can all be a part of. AMEN.

This is a followup to the sermon...

THANK YOU all who attended the domestic giving allocation meeting yesterday. For those who wondered about the specific figures for the percentages I gave in my sermon, here they

are:

Total Budget Expense for 2007: \$254,00

External Giving.....\$81,000 (32%)*

Domestic.....\$51,000

International.....\$30,000

(*This does NOT include earmarked giving for Bokamoso)

Inreach.....\$75,000 (30%)

Community life..\$20,000

Staff.....\$55,000

Debt Service.....\$70,000 (27%)

Building Operations.....\$28,000 (11%)