

“A Woman’s Place is In Leadership” A sermon by Jeffrey Kramer
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
May 26, 2019, Sixth Sunday of Easter
Acts 16: 9-15

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

I imagine there are many here this morning that have not heard of Lydia or only know of her by name. As I began to gather notes for this morning, I looked to my Bible Dictionary as reference ... Lydia is not even listed. So, I asked Alexa; she only knew Lydia as ‘seller of purple’. Checking Siri, she had at least read the passage in Acts and knew that Lydia was the first European convert to Christianity, but little more.

Lydia is huge in the early church! Where did her story go?

Lydia was a “God-fearer”, somebody who, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, is a Gentile who is a believer in the Hebrew God, someone who was outside looking in. It’s Saturday morning and she and her household and other women she had gathered are by the river praying. Paul and Silas tell them of Jesus, and Lydia and all those gathering believed and were baptized.

Lydia is influential as seen that she had a sizable gathering that morning. She is a single woman; the household is hers, there is no mention of a man. She owns a profitable business with operations in multiple countries.

She was not the efficient woman described in Proverbs 31; humble, serving her husband. Lydia was a force. Seller of Purple should not be trivialized. Her dye cannot be duplicated by modern methods. This dye comes from a spiny carnivorous sea snail. You obtain the dye by one of two methods: either you ‘milk’ the snail by poking the thing until it spits purple goo at you or by gathering a lot of them and crushing them into a mass of purple goo. It takes twelve thousand snails to yield 1.4 grams (1/3 teaspoon) of dye. That’s only enough to color the trim of one garment. Her clients were the rich and powerful. To put it in modern terms, Lydia was “Loaded”.

Lydia was forcefully persuasive. She provides hospitality to the men, which was almost scandalous. The word we read as ‘prevailed’, other versions read ‘invited’ are passive; the Greek word would more appropriately translate, “forced us contrary to our nature”. Two Hebrew men staying at the mansion of a single Gentile woman, yes scandalous.

Lydia is a big deal! She was clearly calling all the shots of her household, her business, and all that that influenced. She established one of the first Christian communities in Europe, one that would receive one of Paul’s famous letters. But, also a big deal for what this means for gender roles in the early church: men and women were called, men and women were baptized, and men and women led in ministry. Her home became ground zero for Paul and Silas during their entire mission in Philippi.

How can a woman as influential and crucial to the foundation of the Christian Church be lost, written from history? The Church is being robbed of her powerful history. The Church and the world have suffered from God's gifted women not being allowed their place of service and leadership. Only in the twentieth century have women begun to return to their rightful place in society. Given the current rising tide to return women to weakness and servitude, we need to take a stand and make certain that women retain their prominent role in the church and in society.

The New Testament names many women among the followers of Jesus and in positions of leadership in the early church. Every leadership role that names a man also names a woman; in fact, there are more women named as leaders in the New Testament than men.

For most of the Church's history, in most Christian denominations and movements, women have been denied the privilege of serving as leaders. Aside from just one or two New Testament verses, that do not seem to allow women to have a ministry which involves public speaking, or which involves teaching a man, are frequently cited as reasons women cannot be leaders. There are dozens of women mentioned in the New Testament who did function as church leaders. They serve as valid biblical precedents which call into question the widespread and persistent belief that the Bible teaches that church leaders can only be men.

In Ephesians 4, Paul lists several kinds of ministers which Jesus Christ has given to the church: "He gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastor-teachers. His purpose was to equip God's people for the work of serving and building up the body of Christ."

Apostles were people sent initially by Jesus, and later by the church, to pioneer a new work which facilitated the spread of the gospel. In the New Testament, several people, apart from the Twelve, are mentioned as being apostles. One of these is a woman—Junia.

Junia and Andronicus (who may have been husband and wife) were members of the church in Rome; they may even have been the founders of the church there. Paul sends greetings to them in Romans 16 and speaks warmly of them, mentioning that he is a relative of them (or fellow Jews), and that they had become Christians before he did. Andronicus and Junia had suffered persecution because of their faith and at some point, had been fellow prisoners with Paul. Paul also states that Andronicus and Junia were "outstanding among the apostles". This is a wonderful commendation coming from someone who was himself an outstanding apostle.

Junia was one of the first female apostles, but many more apostolic women, throughout the church's history, have pioneered new works which have facilitated the spread of the gospel.

Second on Paul's list of ministers are prophets. With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the function of prophecy became more widespread than previously. On the day of Pentecost, Peter quoted from the prophet Joel and said: "And it will be in the last days," says God, "that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your youth will see visions and your seniors will dream dreams. Even on both my male servants and on my female servants, in those days, I will pour out my Spirit and they will prophesy."

Prophets were people who spoke for God. Their speech was inspired by the Holy Spirit and it may or may not have included foretelling. In the early church, prophets provided guidance, instruction, strengthening, encouragement, and comfort. Paul considered the ability to prophesy as being the most desirable of the spiritual gifts; and he regarded the ministry of prophets as important and influential. Paul lists prophesying and prophets before teaching and teachers in the lists of ministry gifts in Romans and Ephesians.

We are told that Philip had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. Philip's four daughters are briefly mentioned in the New Testament, but they are mentioned several times in other early church writings.

Third on the list are the evangelists. Evangelists were men and women who preached the gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Euodia and Syntyche of Philippi were coworkers of Paul. Paul wrote that these women "have struggled together with me in the ministry of the gospel. This is similar to what Paul says about Timothy in the same letter: that he had served with him "in the gospel". Like Timothy, Euodia and Syntyche were involved in gospel work. This may well have involved ministering as evangelists.

Another female minister esteemed by Paul was Phoebe. Phoebe was a minister or deacon, and a leader or patron, in the church at Cenchreae. Sadly, this fact is rarely acknowledged in some English translations.

Many deacons in the apostolic and post-apostolic church made journeys during which they acted as agents and envoys of their church. And some were involved in preaching and teaching. We know that Phoebe travelled to Rome as Paul's envoy, but a later writer indicates she travelled to other places too. Phoebe may have travelled widely and proclaimed the gospel in foreign lands an evangelist.

Fourth on the list of ministers are the pastor-teachers. The terms "pastors" and "teachers", joined grammatically in the Greek of this verse, reflect two aspects of the one role.

There are several women in the New Testament who functioned as pastor-teachers. Priscilla, another close friend and coworker of Paul, was one of them. Together with her husband Aquila, she taught the already learned and eloquent Apollos, who was himself a teacher, "the way of God".

In the more reliable, earlier Greek manuscripts, Priscilla's name appears first in four of the six mentions of this couple in the New Testament. This may denote that Priscilla's ministry was more prominent than her husband's. It may also indicate that she had a higher social status than Aquila. "It is well known that the early church attracted an unusual number of high-status women . . ." Some of these women, who lived in relatively spacious homes, hosted a congregation that met in their home. As a prominent member of the congregation, the host would have functioned as a leader employing a ministry gift, perhaps the pastor-teacher gift. Priscilla and Aquila were active in ministry and hosted a church in their home at Ephesus and later at Rome where they ministered as pastor-teachers.

Prisca [Priscilla] is not the only woman associated with house church leadership. A surprising number of women are mentioned in this role. In Acts we see Mark's mother providing a home for the Christians to assemble and at Philippi we hear of believers meeting in the home of Lydia. Writing to the Colossians, Paul greets "Nympha and the church in her house". Chloe is also the host of a home-church, as may have been some of the other women Paul greets in the last chapter of Romans.

The "chosen lady", a term John uses in his second letter, was a woman functioning as a house-church leader and pastor. The word "lady" (*kuria*) used here, is the female equivalent of "lord" (*kurios*). This lady was a woman with an elevated social position. Numerous ancient letters, as well as ancient Greek literature, show that *kuria* was a respectful way to address a woman. The "chosen lady" was a person, a house-church leader and pastor.

The church in general has been very slow to embrace the New Testament ideal of equality and mutuality among people regardless of race and gender. This is shown by the fact that the slave trade and slavery were only outlawed in the "Christian" nations of Great Britain and the United States of America in 1833 and 1865 respectively, and by the fact that racial discrimination has only been declared both immoral and illegal in recent history. I am convinced that discrimination against church leaders on the basis of gender will also become part of our dark and shameful past, and that future generations will look at our present struggle and debate on this subject with contemptibility.

It would be wonderful if the Church as a whole would recognize that, according to the New Testament, women did function as ministers and leaders—as apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers, and that they were respected and valued in these roles by such people as the apostle Paul. In short, it is biblical for a woman to be a church leader. Furthermore, if we deny gifted women the opportunity to exercise their ministries, we reject some of the very people Jesus has appointed and given to his church. The church's mission can only be enhanced and made more effective when gifted men and women minister together using their complementary skills and abilities. Women and men should be united in the cause of the gospel and in building up the body of Christ, as well as in equipping the people of God to reach the lost.