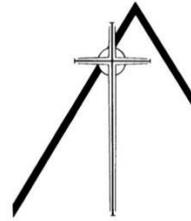


**Faces of Our Faith: Lydia**  
**Psalm 16, Acts 16:11-15, 40**  
**Rev. Jacqueline Decker Vanderpol**  
**November 18, 2018**



Helen Byers has been a friend of this church for the last few years, ever since she moved to Sunrise Senior Living in Superior and started coming with the crew of people who attend from Sunrise. A couple of months ago, Helen went missing. She wasn't at her apartment at Sunrise, and thanks to HIPAA privacy laws, no one could tell me or her friends where she was – not even whether she was in the hospital, rehab or with family. (Which leads to my PSA to say: please make sure the church has the name and phone number of one of your family members; otherwise, HIPAA makes it near impossible to find you. Right now even, write it on the back of your bulletin, hand it to me on your way out of worship. I can't tell you how much grief this will save us. Commercial over.) After some detective work, we found Helen. She had moved in to her daughter's house in Arvada and was on hospice care due to kidney and heart failure. I was visiting with Helen, and her daughter was catching me up on what had happened medically. She said, "Mom's heart is tired and frail." And Helen said, "Yes, but it's a heart that has known so much happiness. How do you thank God for a life this good?" If you didn't know Helen, you might think, "that's sweet." But what you need to know is that Helen raised her family in Los Alamos, New Mexico, so she was on a first name basis with cancer. Helen's husband died of cancer; Helen had cancer twice and survived; Helen lost two sons to cancer – one at 10-years-old and one at four; and on the day Helen died one week ago, her granddaughter's fiancé received a bone marrow transplant to treat his leukemia. Her words weren't sweet; they were said from a depth of faith, said by someone who had taken the rubbish of life and used it as compost for growth and gratitude. During that visit, Helen said that Psalm 23 was her favorite because of the verse, "my cup overflows." How many people who lived the same circumstances as Helen would have said with conviction, "How do you thank God for a life this good? My cup overflows"?

Helen may have thought of Psalm 23, but listening to her, I thought of Psalm 16 which we just read and sang. "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage." *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.* It's one of my favorite verses in Scripture because I hear it said not in a sweet or naïve way, but as Helen would say it. As a statement of deep conviction and faith. Said by someone who can look unflinchingly at the hard and ugly parts of life, and, without ignoring them, still say, *the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.*

This week, I officiated the internment for a different Helen, for Helen Schmalhorst. As her family came forward and placed their hands on her urn and said goodbye, I was struck that everything they said was a word of gratitude. "Thanks for being my mom." "Thanks for being a great mom." "Thanks for accepting me." It was so beautiful. And it made me hope that we don't wait until funerals happen or hospice is called before we say thank you – either to each other or to God. I don't think that was a danger for either of these Helens, and they are a good example for the rest of us. We all need to pause and be grateful for where the boundary lines have fallen for us in pleasant places.

While much is left to the imagination when it comes to our lesser known hero of the faith this morning, Lydia, we do know that her boundary lines were drawn in pleasant places. Lydia is an extremely successful business woman in a world not overly-familiar with successful business women. We know this because she was a dealer of purple cloth. Purple being the color of royalty because it cost so much, and only royals and a few other wealthy people could afford the luxury. In Lydia's day, the only way to get purple dye was from Murex snails, a predatory sea snail found in the Mediterranean. The snails would have to be "milked" to get the dye out of them (spend a little time with that image). It took a huge number of snails to get even a small amount of dye. The Murex snails were so valuable in the ancient world that they were harvested to the point of extinction. All of this is to say that purple was a hard color to come by, so selling anything purple showed you had some real capital to work with.<sup>1</sup>

When Lydia isn't supervising people who are milking predatory sea snails, she hangs out down by the river. That may have been a gathering place for the women in town, or it may have been that that's where Lydia's home was – on the river and large enough to become a gathering place for women. Whichever, she and the other women have gathered for prayer when a couple of men stumble in – Paul and Silas. As he does pretty much everywhere he goes, Paul interrupts the order of worship to share a few of his own thoughts – thoughts about the Messiah, who he calls Jesus. Lydia and her household immediately respond, walking down to the river to be baptized. And immediately after her baptism, she takes action. "Come to my house," she says. "I'll host you. I'll host all of the brothers and sisters who believe in Jesus."

This is why Lydia is remembered as a patron, as a benefactor of the early Church. Remembered as one of the wealthy people who opened their home to make it possible for anyone and everyone to gather and worship Jesus. It's quite likely that the reason there was a church in Philippi, where Lydia lived, and why we have the book of Philippians in Scripture is thanks to Lydia literally making space for the church to exist. The interesting thing, though, is that Lydia didn't listen to Jesus' command to the Rich Young Ruler to "sell everything and follow me." (In her defense, the Gospels hadn't been written yet, so maybe she hadn't heard the story.) But, in any case, she didn't sell her possessions or her home, she didn't stop her business and focus exclusively on the church. She keeps working in commerce. She still spends her days talking about predatory sea snails. And yet she is remembered as one of the primary nurturers of the early Church. Because she looked at her life, thought "the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places," and instead of just being grateful, she translates her gratitude into action, into service. She sees what she uniquely has to offer, how she is uniquely equipped, and she shares it.

It's easy to think, "I don't have as much time as other people to help those in need." Or, to think, "others have more money or more stuff to help those in need." Those things will always be true. Perhaps that's why I so value people who use Appreciative Inquiry as a spiritual practice. If you're not familiar, Appreciative Inquiry is a business trend from a decade or so ago where instead of looking at what is lacking and trying to fill the hole, organizations look at what they have and what's working and try to put it to creative use. Typically, the business world revolves around fixing what's not working – identifying problems, identifying possible causes, brainstorming solutions. It means that the majority of an organization's energy is focused on problems. Appreciative Inquiry encourages organizations to identify what's working, what's going well, where their strengths are and to build on those. Undoubtedly, you can see the connection to our faith life. Lydia could have said, "Sorry new church community that I just

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<sup>1</sup> "Tyrian Purple," Lynn Miller, *Art and Faith Matters*, April 24, 2016.

joined. I'm super busy. I have a booming business to run and a household to manage." She could have seen what she didn't have. Instead, she says, "This booming business that takes up so much of my time has allowed me this large home. Why don't we all meet here when we gather?"

Admittedly, this takes some creativity. And the best example I've heard recently comes from the Riverside branch of New York's Public Library. Michelle Lee is a young adult librarian there. Because of her interactions with young adults and because of her own experience as a young adult trying to get started in the world, she realized how much help people need to launch. Looking at the needs and the library's collection of books, Lee started sharing some wisdom through "adulting" workshops. But those workshops led her to another need: when she encouraged young adults to dress well for interviews, several people said they didn't have – and couldn't afford – interview attire. That's a hard problem for a book to solve. But for a library that is in the habit of loaning stuff to people for limited periods of time, it's really not that hard. So, Lee started the Work Fashion Library, a collection of neutral-colored handbags and briefcases, and purple, blue and striped neckties, all of which can be checked out like books for up to three weeks. A 21-year-old who checked out a black handbag said that her only other option was carrying things to an interview in her school backpack. Carrying the handbag, she said, "made me feel more confident. It made me feel more professional."<sup>2</sup>

Lee saw what the library had – this well-oiled system of loaning things to people – and she put it to use. The first thing Lydia does after her baptism is to notice what she has and to put it to use. She says, "The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places. I have this great big house. Come, join me." This Thanksgiving, may you notice and be grateful for what you have and may you put it to use for others, to the glory of God. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> "Need a Handbag or Tie to Land Your First Job? Borrow One with a Library Card," Melissa Gomez, *The New York Times*, October 9, 2018.