

Good morning-

We opened the service holding Jean and Bill Turner in prayer. We continue to hold them and their family in our hearts as he moves from life to life. There will be a service at the church Saturday at 2:00 with a reception following in the Parish House. If you are able to bake or otherwise provide for the reception, please email Karen Hammond at KHWriter@aol.com

Jean's address is: 102 Texas Road, South Bristol

If you have a favorite story or memory of Bill, please share them with me. Sadly for me, I did not know Bill as you all did. We lit the memorial candle for Ray Ames and hold Clare and their family in our hearts and prayers. Clare's address is: Clare Ames, 11 Dogwood Circle, Franklin, MA 02038

GOSPEL John 17:20-26
NEW TESTAMENT Acts 16:16-34

MESSAGE *Matristics* Pastor Beth Hood

There are courses in seminary called 'Patristics', the study of 'Fathers of the Church.' I have found no courses on 'Matristics'. But there have been plenty of 'Mothers of the Church' throughout the ages.

Mother's Day is almost a holy day in the life of many Protestant churches. We celebrate the motherhood of the women in our lives who have given birth, perhaps more importantly, have given and nurtured life in each of us (not only biological mothers).

In last week's reading from Acts, we met Lydia, the Gentile woman of considerable means who brought herself and her whole household to faith in Jesus Christ, with a group baptism held in the midst of great joy.

In Lydia's story and the stories of so many women in the church we find inspiration for all who open their hearts and minds and homes and 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 are experiencing. We might say today that she 'hungers for meaning in her life.' More than money, more than success, more than power and influence. This is a woman who dealt with the most powerful and wealthy in her society, those who wore purple when common folk couldn't, and a woman who could decide that her whole household would be baptized. When Lydia joined the other women down there by the river, this wealthy, powerful woman left the circles of influence and went out to the margins of her society, joining those who had far less power, influence, and wealth than she did.

The story of Lydia is a story about the early church, about mission, about discernment, about hospitality, community, and the experience of women in the church, often at its edges but never without impact. Lydia embodies Luke's ideal of women's contribution to the church: to provide housing and economic resources.

Lydia brings to mind women through the centuries and in many different settings, our foremothers in faith, who didn't let their marginalization stop them from being powerhouses for good in the life of the church.

It was women here in South Bristol who decided that their town needed a church and set about making that happen.

They were a lot like a group of women in the earliest days of global mission work in the church more than two hundred years ago. When we hear the story of the Haystack Meeting, we hear about the young men who committed to going overseas in mission, but we rarely if ever hear about the women who were such an important and early part of the story of global mission.

Well before the five young men received their call through the thunder and lightning, the women were hard at work on mission. The Female Society for Spreading Christian Education was organized in 1801. The women started the 'Penny Society' and asked women in the churches to give one cent a week for mission.

By 1812, when four of the young men and their wives were commissioned and ready to sail across the sea, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (the men) knew the funds were not sufficient to book passage. The ship's sailing was delayed for several weeks. It was the women who saved the day. The women's Penny Society over twelve years had raised \$6,000-600,000 pennies! Their \$6,000 was what enabled the eight to book passage on two clipper ships, fully outfitted with supplies and food and salary for one full year! We can safely say that without the women, this would not have happened. For fifty years the women faithfully collected their mission pennies and funded many, many missionaries. However, throughout that time the ABCFM (men) would not allow any woman to be sent as a missionary herself.

That is the story of women through the ages in the church. People outside the gate, people on the edge or the fringe of social acceptance, people who are not traditionally given a voice or a place in the life of organized religion. But people making things happen. And that brings us back to this morning's reading.

Paul and Silas, perhaps Luke too, and others followed their routine of going to 'the place of prayer,' perhaps down by the river where they had first met Lydia, or even to a synagogue. We can believe that they kept to their practice of prayer and teaching and preaching the good news of Jesus Christ.

On his regular trips to the place of prayer, Paul kept encountering a woman who was very different from Lydia. While Lydia was a woman of position and many possessions, with her own household and a business to run, this other woman, really just a young girl, was a person in the street, a slave-girl, a possession herself, owned by other humans but also held captive by a spirit that appeared to give her special powers.

The slave girl was a 'diviner'. People believed that diviners could predict the future and see more deeply into realities the rest of us might miss. It would not have been uncommon to encounter a young girl like this one in urban settings. This girl was a lucrative small-business enterprise for the men who owned her. Like too many young girls, she was used by those who figured out a way to make money with her. But her strange public announcements about Paul and his little band of missionaries probably did not bring much income to her owners. She called them slaves and referred to a God that was not her own as 'the Most High God'.

This girl was different from the stories we have heard about people tortured by spirits and demons usually encountered and exorcized by Jesus and his followers. And Paul's reaction was not the compassion of Jesus. More than anything, Paul was 'very much annoyed by her. He was tired of being heckled by the spirit that possessed her and who could recognize who he was, who his God was and what he had to offer.

Paul was focused on what he had come to do and healing slave girls was not on his list. Paul found her distracting even though she proclaimed the truth. Was she too loud, too repetitious, or was it just too much to have the truth come from such a strange source? And so, as much as anything, in annoyance Paul turned and healed her, silenced her.

What about this young girl's life afterward? I'd like to think that as someone still on the margins, she found a place in Lydia's community of faith. Certainly, she was of no further use to her owners. Like too many women in the history of the church, she is unnamed and forgotten.

We don't know what was in Paul's heart and mind when he drove the spirit from the girl, but we do know the price he and Silas pay after the crowd turns on them. The authorities ordered them to be flogged and thrown in the deepest, darkest part of the prison, where despair thrives.

This should have beaten them, it was meant to. But an amazing thing happened in the dungeon of despair. The two men, chained at their ankles and unable to move around sing hymns and pray capturing the attention of all the other prisoners. When an earthquake rattles the prison that holds Paul and Silas captive the chains are broken and they are able to walk free.

Why didn't they? Paul knew the price that their jailer would pay if his charges were to flee. This is more reminiscent of the compassion of Jesus-the Christian compassion that leaves no one behind and no one out, even the most unexpected

people, like slaves and jailers. What happened next is one more story of the power of the gospel to transform lives, when the jailer and his family (like Lydia and her household) are baptized into the faith.

This is a story of liberation, of salvation, of freedom. The jailer asked Paul what he must do to be saved, and Paul answered simply as so many of us do, that he should 'believe on the Lord Jesus.'

Everyone in this story needs to be freed, not only the slave girl but also the men who used her, the men who judged Paul, the jailer and yes, even Paul and Silas who needed to be freed from their narrow way of thinking.

One of the most powerful captivities of our age is the way fear can imprison us in our convictions and our desire for security, making us unable to open our hearts and minds to others, to events, to the God who still speaks through them. How amazed the jailer must be, just as he's about to kill himself, to see that the prisoners are still there! Fear almost leads to death, but compassion leads to his life and his family's life, being transformed. We don't know what happened to the slave girl or the jailer after Paul left, but perhaps we get a hint of that today every time we hear the rest of the story from those who found their way to faith and healing, especially because of the kindness and mercy of another.

We don't just read a story like Paul's, or Lydia's, or the Penny Society. We are part of that great story, that great adventure.