

“We Need Community”
Acts 16:9-15
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
May 26, 2019

We live in the land of rugged individualism and this isn't all bad. Personal responsibility is a good thing. And we live at a time when many claim a personal kind of faith that need not be shared. Baptists appreciate the emphasis on the personal as our movement began with the claim that the individual must be free to respond to God for him/herself.

The trouble is there is no such thing as a lone ranger in life. Even the original Lone Ranger had Tonto at his side. And while Baptists have fought for individual freedom in regard to faith, we also need community. We need companions, other believers to support us and challenge us and help us live out our calling to spread the Gospel.

In *The Search for Common Ground*, the book we are studying with the other half of First Baptist Church, Raleigh, African-American theologian Howard Thurman puts it this way. He says that while much of our experience is intensely personal, we cannot live in isolation from one another. Mutual interdependence is characteristic of all of life. We all belong to each other. Thus, whoever shuts himself away diminishes himself and whoever shuts another away destroys herself (pp, 2-3, 104).

The early church understands this need for community as we see in our reading today from Acts 16. The story seems to focus on the Apostle Paul as the quintessential missionary, but if we look a little closer, we see that Paul does not do it alone. Paul had been traveling with Barnabas and then Silas, but at the beginning of this chapter he selects a new student of his named Timothy to travel with him.

Then, in our reading, the narrative shifts to first person plural. “We set sail from Troas,” the text says. It is the first of many such passages which seem to suggest that the author of Acts, probably Luke, joins Paul and Timothy at this point. He too helps with the work.

And then, one of the women to whom Paul preaches in Philippi, Lydia, not only becomes a believer but immediately supports his work

by opening her home to Paul and his companions not just here but at the end of the chapter after they have spent some time in jail.

So, there are no lone rangers even in the early church. We need others to support us along the way. We need community.

But let's back up a bit and take a closer look at what is happening in this story. Paul and Timothy have been travelling to various places teaching people about Jesus. The Spirit tells them not to go to certain places for reasons that are not named but allows them to go to other places. They end up in Troas and there Paul has a vision in which a man pleads with him to go to Macedonia. Paul assumes that he is to proclaim the Good News there. So, they sail to Samothrace and then to Neapolis, the port city, about two days of sailing altogether with good winds, and finally travel by land to Philippi which is a Roman colony.

They do not find the man in Paul's dream, but they find a group of women having a prayer meeting by the river. We don't know why they are there, but Paul and the others seem to know they will be. And so, they go and speak to the women and Lydia is one of them.

The text says she is a worshiper of God, somewhat like Cornelius who in Acts 10 is said to be a God-fearing man. Both terms imply a non-Jewish person who has some belief in the existence of God.

We are also told that Lydia is from Thyatira and is a dealer in purple cloth, two claims that go together. Thyatira is known for the production of wools and purple dyes which are made from marine snails.

She is a businesswoman and apparently a successful one. We know this because she deals in purple cloth which is a symbol of wealth and prestige and thus a high-profit business, and because she has a home large enough to house many guests.

And interestingly, especially for this time, no husband is mentioned, no man. Lydia runs the business. As one scholar has noted, Paul goes looking for a man in Macedonia but finds a woman - an unusual woman, a powerful woman - who proves to be very helpful to Paul and probably helps start his favorite church.

So, before we get to the broader issue of community, we ought to pause as we did a couple of weeks ago and note again the significance of

women in the early church. After all, the strength of any community depends on the participation of all of its members. And while women may make up just over half of the population, in the church women make up a much higher percentage. So, even in churches where women are not allowed to serve in certain leadership roles like pastor, deacon or director of a mixed-gender choir, women do the majority of the work.

But the task for us today is not just to follow the early church pattern of allowing the gifts of women to be used fully, but to push back against the forces in our culture which still seek to silence the voices of women. Two weeks ago I noted some efforts in recent decades to silence women in churches, but since I preached that sermon, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky has spoken publicly to assure us that this is still an issue.

During a podcast on May 10, Al Mohler said that men and women should have complementary roles in the church but that according to scripture, women cannot have authority over men and thus a woman should not preach. “If you look at the denominations where women do the preaching,” he said, “they are also the denominations where people do the leaving... I think there’s just something about the order of creation that means God intends the preaching voice to be a male voice (*Baptist News Global*, May 15, 2019).”

To be fair, there are texts that talk about authority in this way (1 Timothy 2:12) and tell women to be quiet in church (1 Corinthians 14:34), but there are also texts like Acts 16 wherein women play key leadership roles and in 1 Corinthians 11:5 the Apostle Paul tells women to cover their heads when they pray and prophesy which is a technical term for preaching. So, when a woman preaches, Paul says, she should cover her head. *When she preaches...*

Selective literalism can enable us to claim that the Bible supports a host of questionable things, including slavery and capital punishment for a long list of would-be sins, including sassing your father. I’ve been in favor of that one for years! But a more responsible consideration of the entire biblical witness on any subject often leads to different conclusions or at least more nuanced positions. And when it comes to women, the larger witness points to full equality of women and men.

So, we need to continue affirming women in this church, but we also need to be an advocate for women in the church universal and in society as a whole. Conservative lay teacher Beth Moore said this in a series of tweets on May 11 after a professor criticized her for encouraging women to preach. “I am compelled to my bones by the Holy Spirit – I don’t want to be but I am – to draw attention to the sexism and the misogyny that is rampant in segments of the SBC, cloaked by piety and bearing the stench of hypocrisy.” Many of us are equally compelled by the Spirit to speak out and so we should.

But Moore not only talked about women in the church. She said this about issues surrounding women in national life. “All these years I’d given the benefit of the doubt that these men were the way they were because they were trying to be obedient to Scripture. Then I realized it was not over Scripture at all. It was over sin. It was over power. It was over misogyny. Sexism. It was about arrogance. About protecting systems. It involved covering abuses and misuses of power. Shepherds guarding other shepherds instead of guarding the sheep.”

Now we know why many men do not want women behind pulpits and in other places of leadership! But in the biblical witness women like Lydia and Dorcas, Phoebe and Mary, Ruth and Deborah play critical roles. As we think about our need for community, our need for others, we must make the full inclusion of women and their gifts a high priority.

But thinking about community as a whole in light of our reading from Acts 16, it seems clear that we need other people to live out our calling. Paul is never alone. He always has companions who help him teach and preach, and he gets help from people in the communities he serves. In today’s reading, he is accompanied by Timothy and Luke, and Lydia quickly comes to his aid after God opens her heart and she is baptized. She offers hospitality and support, opening her home to Paul and his companions now and after they are imprisoned.

We too need the support of others, and I mean not just “we” ministers and missionaries, but all of us in the church. We all need encouragement and support, people to laugh with us and cry with us, and all of our efforts are needed to accomplish the church’s mission.

We sometimes proceed as if we think we can make it on our own, but at the best of times and the worst, we realize we cannot. No joy is very deep unless it can be shared with others who understand what it means to us. And when we know loss, we wonder how anyone could make it without a community of fellow believers offering support. It is difficult enough with the church's help. We all need help at some point.

The way we celebrate baptism provides a symbol of our need for community. Baptism is an intensely personal experience. Each of us must respond to God for our self. But none of us comes to faith alone. Others help us learn about who Jesus is. And other people are affected, for better or for worse, by who we are as new believers. So, we celebrate baptism not in isolation from others but in the context of worship, in the presence of the whole community, so that others who have walked with us and will continue to walk with us are present.

Scripture affirms this balance between individual faith and community support. Romans 6 emphasizes the personal side of things as we are each buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life. 1 Corinthians 12 says we are baptized not just into Christ but into the body of Christ, the community of fellow believers.

But, as we have noted already, we not only need each other for support and encouragement, guidance and direction; we need each other to accomplish our mission, we need each member of this part of the body of Christ and every gift God has given us to fulfill our calling. That is the clearest message of the reading from Acts 16. Paul may do a good bit of the teaching and preaching, he may be in the spotlight, but others play roles that are just as critical, including Lydia who offers hospitality now and probably other resources as well over time.

The message for us is that every gift matters; each person matters; whomever we are and whatever we do is needed for the church to be all it can be. We saw evidence of this reality last week when we hosted three Baptist groups' joint meeting. As usual, I got to step into the spotlight for a few pastoral moments, but it took a host of volunteers offering hospitality in the spirit of Lydia along with tireless efforts by Wayne Hager, the kitchen staff and the custodial staff, not to mention Mary Alice Seals running sound for the plenary sessions to enable 125

academic and professional Baptist leaders to have an enriching conference in our space. They all walked away singing the praises of this church. That is the church at its best, the church as it should be, with each of us pitching in, and every gift making a difference.

I love these words of the French monastic thinker Michel Quoist:

The bricklayer laid a brick on the bed of cement.
Then, with a precise stroke of his trowel, spread another layer
And, without a by-your-leave, laid on another brick.
The foundations grew visibly,
The building rose, strong and tall, to shelter men (and women).
I thought, Lord of that poor brick buried in the darkness at
the base of the big building.
No one sees it, but it accomplishes its task, and the other bricks
need it.
Lord, what difference whether I am on the rooftop or in the
foundations of your building, as long as I stand faithfully
at the right place? (*Prayers*, p. 23)

What difference indeed?

As many of you know, I have spent a good bit of time in Kenya doing partnership mission work with CBF field personnel Sam and Melody Harrell. I was technically Sam's mentor during his MDiv work at BTR but he has really been my mentor over the years. He has said many things to provoke thought, but one of the most memorable is this brief phrase which summarizes a key aspect of African thought – *I am because we are*. While in this country we emphasize the individual, in Africa the community is more important. I am because we are.

We are not likely to change our nature completely, but we might benefit from allowing the African perspective to influence us, because we need community – in the church, in this nation, as human beings. I am because we are. We are baptized into Christ *and* into a body of fellow believers. Both of these realities matter.