

“The power of Lydia”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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Acts 16:9-15

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

The year is 1951. The place is Syracuse, First Presbyterian Church. The pastor approaches a 26-year-old Margaret Towner. He asks her if she’s ever considered becoming a pastor. She tells him she had never thought about it.

At that time, in the Presbyterian Church, women couldn’t be pastors. Women had only been voting for 31 years. There were no laws protecting women from discrimination in the workplace or in education. Some states still banned women from juries. But Margaret had discovered a love for the church, and that one question awakened in her a call that would change the rest of her life—and the rest of ours too.

She enrolled in Union Seminary in New York City, and four years later, in 1955, the Presbyterian Church voted to ordain women as pastors. Margaret’s ordination was scheduled one year later, right here in the Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery. The day before her ordination, she came home, and her mother said, “You know, you’re having an awful lot of phone calls here, wondering if you’re the first.” Margaret doubted she was the first. So they called the stated clerk, and it turned out that she was the first. The whole church, national media, everyone burst in excitement. Life magazine photographed her service. Margaret says, “I remember sort of being in a fog—Is this really happening to me? What’s going on? I just followed what people told me to do, and I got to church on time. My mother borrowed a robe from a pastor in Syracuse that was reasonably short, and some of the other women hemmed it up, and we went through the service.”

She went on to pastor several churches, and years later, became the vice-moderator of our entire denomination. Today, more than 5,000 women serve as Presbyterian Ministers of Word and Sacrament. And it all began right here, in our presbytery.

That’s what we’re celebrating today: the voices, the ministries, the power of women.

On the 25th anniversary of her ordination, Margaret spoke with prescience, saying, “We have come a long way, but I still sense a falling backward.”

Today, amid a growing movement to restrict women’s rights, to normalize the objectification of women and the violence against them, our church stands at a fork in the road. If we turn one way, it leads back. If we turn another, it leads forward.

The church stood at this same fork nearly two thousand years ago.

Just before we get to our story today, Acts tells us that Paul, Silas, and Timothy kept trying to take the wrong road. They tried to go west; God stopped them. They tried to go north; God stopped them. Over and over, the “Spirit of Jesus” (16:7) compelled them in one direction.

Paul has a vision, and in this vision, a man in Macedonia, north of Greece, asks for his help. Now Paul thinks he has God’s plan all figured out: he is to preach the gospel to this man, who is to become the first convert of Europe.

When he arrives, however, he finds not a man but a woman named Lydia—someone he had never imagined but who is about to change his life, and ours too.

He finds her in Philippi, a leading Roman colony, where the oppressive power of Rome was strong.

Lydia’s not from there. She’s from Thyatira, in modern-day Turkey. So she’s not only a woman; she’s a foreigner too. She’s made quite a living for herself as an independent businesswoman. Paul finds her among a prayer group of Jewish women. The text doesn’t tell us what Lydia is to them, but it’s fair to guess that she’s their leader; some might even say their pastor.

She and her household are baptized—which is a big statement because it implies that Lydia, a woman, not a man, is the head of her household. And as a woman who knows what it’s like to be a stranger in a strange place, she welcomes these strangers into her home.

As Professor of New Testament Brian Peterson points out, “The author says that Lydia ‘prevailed upon’ Paul and his companions to stay with her and accept her hospitality. There is only one other place in the New Testament where this word is used: in Emmaus on Easter evening, as the two traveling disciples urged the risen Jesus to stay with them that night (Luke 24:29). Perhaps the verbal echo is not accidental; by lives transformed and opened up in faithful discipleship, the fellowship of the risen Lord continues to extend into the world.”

We don’t know what Lydia and Paul talked about that night. But I suspect that it was a lively conversation, with mutual learning, Paul and Lydia exchanging ideas, stories, faith. Because the very next thing Paul does is free an enslaved girl. He frees her of the demon that her enslavers exploited to make money. For this, he is imprisoned and beaten. When released from jail, the first place he goes is Lydia’s home.

Lydia is powerful—so powerful that she can “prevail upon” the church and its leaders to see God’s plan where they were blind, prevail upon Paul not just to accept her hospitality but accept her life, her leadership, her voice. It’s a different kind of power. It’s not dominating and controlling. It’s not perfect and without complaint. It’s relational and vulnerable and strong enough to invite someone into the beautiful, messy truth of your story.

Hear near the end of the Easter season, we continue to experience and live out that power, “prevailing upon” the world to hear, and see, and know the freedom-making, life-giving, disciple-raising power of God in the risen Christ (cf. Brian Peterson).

Margaret Towner prevailed upon the world and became a pastor when they said no woman could. Now, the PC(USA) stands poised to achieve gender parity in eight years.

She and the thousands of her spiritual daughters prevailed upon the world and refused to accept lower pay, a disparity that exists to this day. They refused to accept a church in which women are the majority but men still make up the majority of pastors and are more likely to be hired. They refused to be silenced as they reported ongoing prejudice, such that 84 percent of Presbyterian women pastors today report experiencing discrimination, prejudice, and harassment (Presbyterian Research Services, 2016).

When Henry Fowler was forced to leave Second Presbyterian Church because he was too radical an abolitionist, Christians, most of them women, prevailed upon the world and founded this church, the first and only in Auburn to be founded on the cause of freedom and equality. Of the 60 founding members of this church, 45 were women. They chose to build a church that gave women the right to vote. And instead of selling the pews to the wealthy, as most churches did then, they assigned pews by lottery, so that the wealthy and the less privileged were given equal status and sat together. It was at that church that Harriet Tubman was married and Frederick Douglas lectured.

It was Sarah Underwood who prevailed upon the world and sold us this land, laying the cornerstone of this sanctuary, calling it a “sermon in stone which will preach to those who tread these streets perhaps 500 years from now.” It was another woman, Janet Seward, who donated the stained glass window behind me, in memory of her mother.

Midge Drummond prevailed upon the world and was the first woman to be ordained an elder at this church. Now, 52 percent of all Presbyterian elders are women. Jill Fandrich is our clerk of session and chair of Worship. Susan Marteney, our chair of Mission. Monika Salvage, our chair of Christian Education. Judy Santillo, our deacon president. Monta Faye Tuxill, our chair of scholarships. Lori Rhodes Pettit, our music director. Noel Lardeo, our Children’s Worship Center storyteller. Shavonn Lynch, our inquirer for ordination.

When Auburn faced a shortage of early childhood education, women at this church prevailed upon the world and founded a nursery school as a center of imagination, learning, and character building.

The Rev. Cyndie Crowell prevailed upon the world and became the first woman to serve as Westminster’s pastor, and amazingly, she can’t recall a single time in which she was challenged on the basis of her gender. She brought creativity and a fresh, new style to the pulpit, advancing the use of gender inclusive language.

The Rev. Janet Newman prevailed upon the world and helped create Matthew House, a place of love, dignity, and hospice for the dying.

Annette Bell prevailed upon the world, and led this church into the creation of a daring new ministry for our children and youth called REACH.

Kim Patch prevailed upon the world, and created the first drop-in center and support group for LGBTQ teens in Cayuga County.

And there are so many others that I want to name, but I think I'd have to name you all, along with all the saints in heaven and all the saints in nursing homes and spread across the nation. So I'm just going to ask you to stand up, every woman here who has ministered as a leader in one way or another.

Let us invite each other into our homes, our stories, our lives, so that we too can prevail upon the church and the world to take the right path, to find again the power of Lydia and all her spiritual daughters, till all the limits we place on people, from gender to race, from age to ability, are wiped away, and the family of God is—at last—whole. **Amen.**