

September 24, 2017

Acts 16:11-15

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Portraits of Faith Series (Women of the New Testament)
Lydia's Faith Story

How did you become a Christian? What happened in your life? What happened in your heart to bring you to faith in Jesus?

Did you do it yourself? Was becoming a Christian your choice? Your decision? Or were you influenced by your parents? Coerced by your spouse? Encouraged along the way by a friend or a church worker?

Everybody's faith story is different. What's your faith story? Think back for a minute today. How did you become a Christian?

The Bible is full of faith stories – people coming to believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior, as the promised Messiah, as the Son of God.

We read today the story of a woman named Lydia. And as we wrap up our sermon series on Women of the New Testament today, Lydia's story is really important for us. Because the Bible tells us precisely how it happened. How did Lydia become a Christian? It tells us right here in verse 14.

First, let's set the scene real quickly. St. Paul, the missionary apostle, arrives in Lydia's city, Philippi. He encounters a group of Jewish women down by the river. So Paul and his friends begin talking to them, talking about Jesus.

One of the women listening that day is Lydia, a capable, successful businesswoman. Lydia hears Paul telling the incredible story of Jesus of Nazareth: his sinless life, his miracles, his sacrifice on the cross, his resurrection. Lydia has heard the promises of a Messianic Savior to come, and now Paul is telling her that Jesus is the One.

So what happens next? Why does Lydia take that leap of faith? How does she become a Christian? Verse 14: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.” The Lord opened her heart!

Paul is the one talking – his lips are flapping. Lydia is the one listening – her ears are open. But the Lord is the One who opens her heart! He causes Lydia to pay attention to the story, and to trust its veracity and truth. And Lydia believes. She comes to faith in Jesus. She becomes a Christian.

How? The Lord opened Lydia’s heart. What an awesome faith story!

Now, what’s this up on the screen? *Can-opener*. Is a can of refried beans, or any can, able to open itself? No, someone has to grab a can-opener and open it up.

What about a person? The Gospel’s not for cans of refried beans, is it? Jesus came for real, live, hurting people. Can a human, deep down in their heart, respond to the Gospel story? Can a person come to believe, all by themselves, that Jesus is their Savior?

The Bible tells us that our hearts are impure, unholy. The Word teaches that we are all sinners, and our lives testify to this truth every day, don’t they? We are sinners. We’re sinful. And our sinful hearts cannot reach out to God. Sinners can’t decide by themselves to believe in Jesus. Faith doesn’t come by our choice, but by the work of God in us.

The Lord opens the heart. He used a can-opener named Paul to open Lydia's heart. And maybe he used a person or two somewhere along the way as his instruments to help open your heart. But the Lord was the One who grabbed the can-opener, and opened your heart to believe in Jesus.

The Bible tells us this is how it happens. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17). "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14). "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 10:44).

Lydia's faith story reminds us that the Lord is the One who opened her heart, and the Lord is always the One who opens the heart.

And let's be very clear on this. God would open every human heart. God wants every woman, every man, every child, every youth, to believe in Jesus. God is always seeking to save sinners, touch hearts, convert non-believers. But he never forces his grace on anyone.

Lydia could have said "No" to Jesus that day by the river. People do this all the time. Many out there despise the Word, or ignore the story of Christ. Too many scoff at the notion that there is a God who is real, or take lightly the need for their own forgiveness and salvation. And this is heartbreaking for God, when people say "No" to him. He gives humans free will, but his earnest desire is to open every human heart.

And not just once. The Lord is the one who opened our hearts when we came to faith; but the Lord wants to keep on opening our hearts. Your faith story is just getting started! Every day of your Christian life, God wants to open your

heart to Christ-like service and Christ-like caring, to Christian witnessing and outreach and stewardship and fellowship. God may be trying to open your heart today, right now, to some ministry, some connection with another person in need, some new commitment, some new adventure in your faith story. Be careful that we're not the ones saying "No" to God. Because I just know that God wants to use you today, this week, in some way. He wants to open the heart of one of your friends and neighbors, one of your non-believing family members, co-workers, or classmates. God challenges us all today to keep reaching out in love, allowing him to use us as his instruments, as his can-openers.

Do you see why God called us all together, as part of this church? Do you see why Hope's mission statement is so important? "The people of Hope Lutheran Church proclaim and live the Word and love of Christ." God wants to open the hearts of more and more people in our community today! And God is using our church – God is using us – to open hearts. Thank the Lord for giving us faith in Jesus, and for using us to open hearts. Amen.