

This week I found myself in a local store and ran into a friend that I had not talked to in a while. He asked me about my children and then I asked him about his children. I was aware that he has a high school daughter who is looking at career and college possibilities. In the course of our conversation the idea of pursuing a seminary education came up and he told me that he had raised that possibility with his daughter.

I was intrigued by this because I know that he attends a church that does not allow women to be in church leadership and serve as elders, deacons, or pastors. He then told me that he was telling his daughter that she should pursue whatever her calling is and to not allow their family's current context to restrict her career choices.

In other words, just because their church does not recognize women in church leadership does not mean that his daughter was not called into church leadership as a pastor, elder, or deacon.

I was intrigued by this conversation because of the passage which we have now come to in the book of Acts. We have been reading through the book of Acts over the past several weeks to catch a glimpse of what the early church was like so that we can catch a glimpse of what we are to be as a church today. I know that I have learned a great deal through this series and I hope that this is the same for others as well.

Earlier we heard read the beginning of the story of Deborah in the Old Testament. Deborah lived during a time in the Old Testament when the nation of Israel was on a downward spiral. It was the so called time of judges when leaders were sought out to lead the Israelites into battles against their neighboring countries.

But some judges were not necessarily military leaders but ones that people went to in order to settle disputes. Deborah was apparently one of these types of judges. She was a prophet that people went to in order to seek wisdom as they encountered disputes with one another.

And what is unique about Deborah is, of course, that she is a woman. Even though men were recognized and turned to for their leadership, we have this unique story of a woman named Deborah who is sought out for her wisdom and leadership. And this is not uncommon in the Bible. Women assume roles in the Bible that seem to be quite contrary to the culture around them.

Today we are going to read a passage in which women play a prominent role. Last week we read that Paul and his companion Barnabas got into a disagreement. The two had traveled together to do ministry together but they came to a difference of opinion. Paul and Barnabas split and Paul then joined up with Silas and then Timothy and they set out on what is considered Paul's second big missionary journey.

In this second journey Paul leaves Jerusalem and travels by land up through what is considered modern day Lebanon and Syria and around the Mediterranean Sea through what is now modern day Turkey. Paul then has a vision in which a man from Macedonia tells Paul that he is to cross the Aegean Sea and come to Macedonia.

Macedonia is modern day Greece and considered the eastern edge of Europe. Philippi is a city in Macedonia or modern day Greece. So this scene which we will be reading comes from what is now modern day Greece.

In addition to what is printed in the bulletin I am going to read the next story as well because I think this second story provides a good contrast to the ways that women were treated. In the first story pay attention to the color of the cloth and then I am going to share why this is important.

Read Acts 16:11-15

Lydia is described as a dealer in purple cloth. I bring this to our attention not because it is a primary color of Northwestern High School or Clemson University. Purple was the color of royalty and it was the color of royalty because it was very expensive to produce.

Purple dye was produced from the spit of sea snails that were native to this particular area around the Mediterranean Sea. That's right. The spit of sea snails. And you had to have a lot of sea snail spit to make the purple dye. It was also a very smelly process.

In the story which we read, Lydia is a dealer in purple cloth. It is assumed therefore that she was a wealthy businesswoman. Lydia is never described as a wife of someone. She appears to be the head of her household and she is the one who initiates her entire household to be baptized. She is the one who opens up her household to welcome Paul and his companions.

So in this first story that we read we encounter a self-supporting businesswoman who is considered the first Christian convert in Europe. Think about Lydia and the way she is treated as a woman of faith as we now move into our second story. This is the story of a woman who is treated very differently than Lydia.

Read Acts 16:16-24

So Lydia is the story of a woman who is treated respectfully and now we have read the story of a woman who is not. In this second story a woman who is possessed by an evil spirit is being used by a group of men for their own financial gain.

They want her to remain trapped by an evil spirit so that they can use her wild appearance to sucker gullible passersby to listen to her predict their future. These men were basically acting as pimps and wanting this woman to remain trapped in their possession.

But in this story the Holy Spirit has a different plan for this woman. Rather than being trapped by these unscrupulous men, the Holy Spirit works through Paul and his companions to release her from this bondage. Paul and his companions follow the words from Jesus to release the captives and grant freedom to this woman.

But this woman's pimps do not like what Paul and Silas and Timothy have done. These men then play on the people's worse fears that Paul and his companions are stirring up trouble. They tell the people that Paul is advocating strange customs and he is disrupting the status quo.

The status quo where these men are able to benefit financially on the backs of others and the status quo where women are treated with disrespect. And so these men stir up the crowd so much that the crowd strips Paul and Silas of their clothes and they are then publicly beaten.

But Paul never apologizes for what he has done. He knows that part of his calling is to release those who are bound. To release those who are bound so that they can experience the true freedom that Christ seeks for them.

So we have two stories of women who were given freedom after encountering the gospel message. These two women come from two very different backgrounds. Lydia a wealthy businesswoman and the other woman who is not even named but is described as a woman bound in slavery. Women who encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ and who are freed up to serve God in a new way.

I have been lifting up one trait over the past few weeks that I think makes Allison Creek unique and will serve us well in the future. That trait is how young people are being nurtured and placed in positions of leadership. Most every church I know does not do that. Most churches I know have the belief that worship should be only geared toward adults and that children and youth should be directed to worship that is separate from adults.

But what we are observing here at Allison Creek is children and youth taking on more and more leadership roles and finding that all people are welcome into worship and worship leadership at this church.

I want to throw out today a second trait that I think makes Allison Creek unique in this area. In this church, women and men serve equally in church leadership. And seeing the gifts of men and women equally is not the way that most of the churches around us see the role of women and men. Most churches around us believe that only men can serve as pastors, worship leaders, and as elders or deacons.

It is true that the Bible does contain passages of Scripture which limit the roles of women in church leadership in certain contexts and in a certain period of history. But when one reads the Bible in its entirety you find stories of women like Lydia, Priscilla, Ruth, Mary, and Deborah. You find the stories of these women who are used by God to be faith leaders. Leaders in the midst of a culture that restricted the role of women in leadership.

I am thankful that I am part of a church that has men and women who serve on the Session and in other leadership roles. I know some pastor colleagues and lay leaders who are in churches that do not allow women in leadership roles and my friends are struggling with this. In fact, I know one friend who invites women to his Session meetings even though only men can officially serve in that church. These colleagues are forced to try polity gymnastics to try to unofficially bless women as leaders.

I know other church leaders who do not want women in church leadership because it would threaten their power and control as men. As long as men are in control then the status quo is not disturbed. Similar to the men who did not want their slave girl to be released from her evil spirit.

I also have friends who are women who are leaders in their chosen professions like lawyers, professors, doctors, and small business owners but they attend churches that do not allow them to be leaders in their churches. I think it is sad that my friend who owns her own law firm does not have those same skills affirmed and utilized in the church where she worships with her family including her daughter.

But you don't have to worry about that here at Allison Creek. Our polity or church governing structure in the Presbyterian Church (USA) welcomes men and women into leadership. So it seems to me that another niche that we can claim in this community is that we are a church that welcomes the gifts of men and women into all leadership positions in the church.

And that is a good thing. A lot of people who are not involved in churches today do not want to be involved in churches because they think that we are chauvinistic and judgmental. We here at Allison Creek can witness to something very different than what many people have experienced in church. We can give witness that God calls men and women into leadership and we can celebrate that diversity here at Allison Creek Church.

We are blessed with lots of women in the Scriptures who gave witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. Today we can continue to live into this biblical model and celebrate the gifts of men and women. AMEN.

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