

“Can I buy what she’s selling?”

Sermon for May 1, 2016

by Rev. Leah Fowler

Leonia Presbyterian Church

Acts 16:9-15; John 14:23-29

Are you as nervous about this moment as I am? I expect you are. I have been wondering and praying about you for months, ever since I first read the Church Informational Form that announced this position and felt the tickle of a call. I have looked at your names in the Directory, curious to match names with faces. I have felt excitement about your ethnic and racial diversity, your welcome of LGBT persons, and your commitment to social justice. From what I know about you, you care deeply about this church and community. In the time since your last pastor left, many of you have stepped up your game in leadership to keep this ministry going strong. Some of you have left your comfort zones to do so, perhaps sacrificing time you normally do other things, or making phone calls and visitations you had never before made. Maybe some of you have held another member in care and prayer during the loss of a loved one and represented the church even when you don't know the right words to say, as if there *are* any “right” words. While you are probably eager to loosen the reins just a little, you still want to make sure the church is indeed in good hands.

And so you may wonder, “Can I buy what she’s selling?” I hope you can! We have some time to figure that out. You will have to listen to how I shape stories, weave the messages of Jesus into church life, and share care for you as we get to know one another. And at the same time I will be looking and listening for what it is *you* offer: what gifts God has brought to you and how you share them in your lives and community.

Living in Midtown Manhattan-- you should know that as my wife and I look for longer term housing we have a temporary arrangement with her company at 8th

Avenue and W. 50th street-- I only have to go 2 feet out the door of my building before someone tries to sell me something. The first person is the candied nut man. Then at the corner it is the fruit vendor, and across the street it is the ice cream truck-- not to mention the dozens of restaurants lining our one-block radius. When we first got here, each evening our family would discuss what we should do for dinner. My wife would say, "It's a beautiful night; let's eat at an outdoor cafe!" until we realized that our wallets and wastelives could not take so many beautiful nights in a row! Add to the temptations a four-year-old daughter who is wide-eyed and newly primed as a consumer. We are trying to teach her that just because something is available doesn't mean you need to buy it, but truthfully we need reminders of that lesson too.

Lydia in the Book of Acts had to have been a shrewd businesswoman. The artistry of creating purple cloth involved gathering the excretions of a certain kind of snail from the seas around Tyre and Phoenicia¹. It was painstaking work. Commentaries suggest Lydia may have been a slave who earned her freedom. To be an independent business woman must have taken wisdom and grit in that time and place; in those days, your "womancard"² got you far less than it does today. I imagine Lydia did not buy *anything* just because it was available.

And yet, Paul made the gospel of Jesus Christ available, and Lydia took no hesitation before buying it. She immediately and eagerly asked to be baptized, along with her household too, and then welcomes the missionaries into her home as guests. In doing so, Lydia stands at the threshold of the Christian movement spreading from beyond the limits of Asia Minor and into Europe.

Lydia's home serves as a portal to uncharted territories for Paul and his band of witnesses to Jesus Christ. Lydia is a Gentile, and yet already a worshipper of God.

¹ Lynn Miller, an artist and Presbyterian Elder, describes this process in her blog: <http://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2016/04/tyrian-purple-art-lectionary.html>

² After Donald Trump accused Hillary Clinton of playing the "woman's card" this week, the internet blew up with women wryly commenting on what the "woman card" actually gets. See article on NPR: <http://www.npr.org/2016/04/29/476175806/-in-memory-of-the-week-the-woman-s-card>

She has gathered down by the river to pray with a group of women on the Sabbath. Upon hearing Paul, she opened her heart eagerly and asked for baptism for herself and her household. Her hospitality to Paul and his band is her response to being welcomed in Christ. We do not know but we may wonder if she used her resources as a merchant of purple cloth-- only sold to the very wealthy who could afford such a luxury-- to support the spread of the Christian story.

I am struck by this earthly, physical presence of Lydia, with her textured, richly colored purple cloth, offering hospitality in her home. You know there is a unique way each family's home smells when you walk into it. The smell tells you what animals they have, what they cook, what they clean with (if they clean at all), the scents from the garden just outside their window, the layers of years they have been in one place. We become smell-blind to our own homes, but our guests know the smells of how we live and that is one of the more personal experiences of visiting another's home. We might imagine Paul and his band of missionaries walking into Lydia's house, taking off their shoes as they enter, seeing the rich purple cloth folded on shelves against the wall. We can wonder what they ate, where they slept, the conversations they shared about the Christian faith while they put wine to their lips.

Contrast that with Jesus' words, which are words of departure rather than of embodied presence. "I am going away, and I am coming to you. If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father." There is no home mentioned in this passage, and if you could conjure up a smell it is of Jesus' breath as he speaks these words, and perhaps his body which is physically present as he shares these words with the disciples-- but it is a body that will also disappear. What will be left, Jesus tells them, is an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in Jesus' name. While the rock band Nirvana won a Grammy for their song "Smells like Teen Spirit," I cannot imagine a smell for the Holy Spirit. The physicality of the Holy Spirit seems elusive in every way, in fact. It is such a surprising thing, because Jesus' ministry was so physical: breaking bread, spitting into the dirt to make paste that will heal a blind man, overturning the money tables in the temple. We even witness Jesus' physical death through the different gospel perspectives: a

brutal, traumatic experience as he breathes his last. But in contrast to all this physicality, here we see a Jesus announces to his disciples, his friends, that he will no longer be physically with them; he must depart.

Here at The Presbyterian Church in Leonia there may be some lingering confusion, grief and fear just as the disciples felt over Jesus announcing his departure, as you have recently said goodbye to a pastor who served you well for 15 years and for many shared some of the most important moments of your lives. I understand Rev. Debra Given left this church in a vital, healthy place, and for that I am thankful. I look around and see you have a robust and diverse laity that has also served this church well. As we stand here together at the threshold of a new age in this time of transition, I look forward to helping you explore where and how Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to be with you and offer you vision for the shaping of her Church.

When Jesus left, he promised his followers he would not leave them alone. The Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is coming-- to teach us and to remind us of all the things that Jesus said. As we move toward Pentecost, which is 2 weeks from today and is the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit descending on the beginnings of the Christian church, let us consider welcome, as Lydia showed, both to the Christian message and to those who give and receive the Christian message, as an important way the Holy Spirit makes an embodied presence. As we come to know one another-- the textures of our personalities, the accents of our different tongues, the smells of one another's homes (please don't feel like you need to use febreze if I should come to visit you), the vision of the Holy Spirit on your faces, and the taste of shared communion, may it be but a short and nurturing stopping ground as we then turn beyond ourselves to offer that same hospitality, that same welcome, to the next Lydias we have yet to meet in this changing era of church. Amen.