

When the missionary journeys of Paul and Silas took them to Europe, the first city they came to was Philippi. On the Sabbath day they looked for a place to worship and went outside the city by a river where some women regularly met for prayer. There they met Lydia, who the text tells us was already a worshiper of God.

Lydia was a dealer in purple cloth, a businesswoman, and perhaps the provider for her family. Her home was in Thyratira, which we know was famous for its purple dye. In *The Iliad*, Homer wrote about the famous purple dye of that Thyratira. It's hard for us to understand the fuss about purple cloth, but in ancient society it was precious. That's because the only source of this dye came from a particular shellfish found along the Northeastern shore of the Mediterranean. Extracting the rare dye was very costly, and so purple fabric was worn only by the wealthy. Since Lydia is now living in Philippi, the chances are good that she owned the local franchise for these expensive Thyritian fabrics. You may want to think of it as an ancient Giorgio Armani store.

Clearly, Lydia was doing well professionally. But in spite of her considerable success, she seems to be looking for something more in her life, which would explain why she regularly went to the river to join other women in prayer.

When Paul came her small group, he did what he always did as a missionary. He explained how God had been searching for every one of them and had come to find them in Jesus Christ. We are told the Lord opened Lydia's heart to Paul's teaching about Jesus Christ, and she was baptized along with her household.

That is a fascinating phrase: "The Lord opened her heart." It implies that her heart was previously closed-down. Anyone who functions in the business world like Lydia, knows why she would have closed down her heart. It's a tough, competitive market out there, which would have been even more true for a businesswoman in ancient society. If Lydia made decisions based on her heart, she wouldn't be in business long, and therefore not be able to care for your household. That's why most of us learn to keep our hearts guarded when at work, but open when we go home, or come to worship. The problem with this strategy is that the door to the heart eventually gets stuck closed – all the time, everywhere.

You don't have to be in business to know about the danger of leading with an open heart. Anyone who has tried to do something charitable only to have it thrown in your face knows this threat. So does anyone who's ever been in a relationship that went bad, been abused by a parent, betrayed by a friend, or had a child grow up to reject the love that was given at great sacrifice. We've all learned that if you keep your heart open, eventually someone is going to go in there and do a lot of damage.

There is a world of hurt out there, and not all of it is caused by evil people. Some of the worst hurts come from people we trusted, who may have intended to do good things, but caused a lot of pain along the way. The ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "I don't know if more harm is done by those who do evil well, or those who do good poorly." Sooner or later, we are all hurt, even by those who love us. So, we do the only thing that makes sense. We close down the heart, try to get by without it, and live with familiar strangers.

When I was in graduate school in South Chicago and moved into my apartment, I was surprised to discover the front door had three deadbolt locks. Initially I wondered what the relative benefit was of the second and third locks, but soon I discovered it was psychological. After being defended all day in my seminars and at work and defended on my way home through the city streets at night, it felt reassuring to come home and go – click, click, click. The gates to my life were finally locked closed and I was safe.

I've watched this same dynamic happen early in my pastoral care when I asked a question that was too personal too soon, and people would shut down as their hearts went click, click, click. Or consider a couple that have been dating for a while. Someone takes the risk of saying I love you, but the other person isn't ready for this, is maybe terrified of it, and becomes very quiet. You can almost hear the locks tumble into place – click, click, click. And that's as far as that relationship is going to go.

The great problem with closing down the heart is that it leaves us lonely and so unhappy. We stay busy as if we could outrun the deep inner sadness. We put on a face to meet the people you meet. But late at night when you're too tired to run, and too alone to ignore the sadness you wonder if you will ever be happy.

Again, maybe that is why the successful businesswoman Lydia kept going to the river to worship. Maybe she was asking God if there wasn't something more than success. Then she heard about God dying to love us in Jesus Christ, and it got her heart open again. And that's why we call the Gospel good news.

After God opened her heart, we are told that Lydia was baptized. In baptism, God is taking the risk of putting the words out there, offering a sacred "I love you," which is given only by grace. And faith? Faith is spending the rest of our lives saying, "I love you too."

Every time we witness a baptism in the church, we all participate in the sacrament by remembering we too have passed through the waters of God's grace, which propped open our hearts again. Until our hearts are opened to Jesus Christ, they will never be open to those he brings into our lives. Loving is always dangerous business, and we had better already have a Savior in our hearts if we are going to try it.

It is significant that Lydia had her whole household baptized with her, which probably included her children as it would have in most ancient families. Since baptism identifies us with the grace of God, like Lydia, we also baptize our babies. Who better embodies receiving grace than a child, who can only receive?

These babies are born with open hearts because that is how God created us. The sacrament of baptism seals God's grace into their lives by the Holy Spirit who keeps the doors of their little hearts propped open so they will always be vulnerable to loving others. Will this love hurt them later in life? Of course. But that is why the Spirit brings Jesus into their hearts before they even know it.

The immediate way that Lydia, a new babe in the Christian faith, demonstrates her loving open heart is through hospitality. She urges the apostles to stay with her, opening her home, her life, to the people God has given her. Through baptism, she has been made a part of the household of God, and these men who were strangers are now part of her household as well. Also, we have to believe she conducted her business a little differently knowing now that her true calling was to live in all of life with an open heart.

The church in Philippi, which began with Lydia's conversion, would be persecuted for the next 300 years as it was throughout the Early Church. But in spite of the persecution, the Christian faith continued to spread because people found the lives of Christians so compelling. With open hearts the church insisted on maintaining a social witness to its faith. One of the first mission programs was to collect baby girls who were abandoned by the river, and to give them a home. Lydia must have loved the poetry of saving young girls by the river where she was saved by Christ. All of that world-changing good began with people responding to the Gospel's call to stop closing down their hearts.

Nobody does anything of worth in this world without an open heart. Your baptism proclaims you have to keep loving, and forgiving when loving hurts, and then loving again, and forgiving and loving.

For the Christian this is an identity issue – it is what we have done since the Early Church. But for the world, it is a hope issue. The world may not believe our gospel about the grace of God but it at least needs to believe the

church believes it, because the world needs us to keep our hearts open to its pathos. And only the grace of God can get us there. Amen.