

A Causative Statement

Acts 16:11-15, 40

17 July 2025

for Westminster Presbyterian, Greenville, SC

Hear also Acts, chapter 16, verses 11-15 and 40.

¹¹ We therefore set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. ¹³ On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.

...⁴⁰ After leaving the prison they went to Lydia's home, and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Back when I was in college, Peter Hobbie took our class to tour the local cemetery. As we walked around he encouraged us to take note of what appeared on headstones and imagine what the stones may convey about the individual on whose resting place we gazed. Most common were family names and signifiers: *beloved daughter* or *proud husband*. Military ranks were noted as were, to my surprise, a number of designations marking the decedent's affiliation with Greek Life. Bob: Sigma Chi. James: Kappa Alpha. When I told my dad about the trip he reminded me of a marker at Elmwood Cemetery in Columbia, about a mile from Carolina's historic horseshoe. Alongside an etched Gamecock, the epitaph reads "On the whole I'd rather be / at USC"

Dr. Hobbie was, I think, trying to get us to consider memory and legacy. Who writes the final word on who we are, and what might that word be?

I think often about that cemetery, most especially when I get exorcised about some bit of autobiographical trivia in which I take inordinate pride. For the amount of time I've spent talking about it you would think that I'd like to inscribe on my tombstone that I got to see Beyoncé and Jay-Z in concert on my birthday at Williams-Brice Stadium, or that the year prior, also on my birthday) the sun and mood stood still for an eclipse in my honor. Is that my eternal legacy? Perhaps I should note that I was there when Kamilla Cardoso made *the shot, that most improbable three*, the one that sent South Carolina to the SEC finals? Will I etch on my tombstone the alphabet soup shorthand that designates my academic degrees: here lies Leigh, D.Min., Th.M., M.Div., B.A., she clearly died trying too hard.

Or maybe I could add my lot in with the growing trend to put QR codes on tombstones so that you can click through for all of my hits. Scan my tomb and make sure “Sandstorm” plays alongside “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.” Link to my favorite books and TV, or to a particularly searing poem that carried me through my 20s. Perhaps attach my thesis next to a photo of my parents, wife, and children. By all means, throw in a link to Westminster’s website, specifically the “Pledge Today” page.

- How can we distill a life?
- Of everything in the rich tapestry of our being, how might we be remembered?
- And what in God’s name does a cemetery in Clinton have to do with Paul and Lydia?

Coming in at number two or number four, depending on how you count the Trinity, Lydia is my favorite character in Scripture. Her story is odd and vague but full of surprising, queer detail. From the few verses that make up her story we know only a handful of things about the woman in Philippi:

- she had a gaggle of friends with whom she convened on the Sabbath,
- she was what today we might call a “seeker” (in Acts, a “worshipper of God” designates someone who had not converted but engaged in the study of Jewish Scripture),
- she was a woman of some means, indicated by both her profession (a dealer of purple cloth) and the additional note that she was head of household,
- she was the first recorded member of the church in Europe,
- and she was an immigrant. Despite her own prosperity, in the wealthy Hellenistic Roman colony of Philippi she was still marked as an other, a woman from Thyatira in the Turkish region of *Lydia*.

We can assume more: she was likely literate, she did not need the assistance of a male heir or husband to carry out her business, and she found it necessary to gather with her woman *outside* of the Roman city. What else should we say about her? And with all the characters in Acts, why would we spend time with Lydia?

Though they were not intended to, many of the stories in Acts depict, perhaps with exaggeration, the origins of the congregations to whom Paul wrote his most famous letters. In each city, Paul and his companions established the house churches whose city-names are shared with some of the oldest texts of the New Testament.

Before Rome and Athens or Corinth and Thessaloniki, Paul’s first stop in Europe was Philippi, the ancient Mediterranean city where the armies of Octavian and Mark Antony defeated Julius Caesar’s assassins and paved the way for Octavian to become the first Emperor of Rome. A profoundly important city along a key trade route, Philippi was known for its wealth and affinity for Roman culture, government, and rule. It was a model of the Empire: efficient, lovely, and brutal.

It is no accident, then, that when Paul comes to Philippi he finds a receptive audience *outside* the city’s gates. The burgeoning message of Christianity, born from of Judaism, was, then and now, a threat to systems of power that sought to form people contrary to God’s intentions. It was a threat to Rome. So it is that day, on the banks of a river, away

from the Roman Governor's watchful eye, Paul and his companions meet Lydia and hers.

The strange encounter, this biblical meet cute becomes Lydia's legacy, and reminds us in whose story we live and move and have our being, and how we might hope to be remembered.

Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, the church whose origins are narrated in our text today, is one of the most important letters in the New Testament. Without the letter to the Philippians, Christian theology would be devoid of some of its most foundational Trinitarian theology and its most cherished devotional texts.

Lydia didn't know any of that, though. What she knew is that God, in the hearing of Scripture, changed her life. In response to that transformation, Lydia was compelled to offer a type of hospitality that would build the church. *That's* why Lydia is important today.

Hear the text again:

"¹⁴ A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us," wrote Paul's companion, "she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.' And she prevailed upon us."

Lydia was *listening*. When Paul came along interpreting the story and preaching the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation, God did something in her heart. The Spirit, who is, after all, the main character of Acts, transformed her hearing and gifted her with faith.

Pay attention to what happens after God opens Lydia's heart. She doesn't recite a perfect litany of religious dogmas or begin to memorize the (albeit yet unwritten) Westminster standards: she opens her home...not once, but twice. Lydia *prevails* on Paul — insisting that he and his companions be made welcome. Between the first and final verses I read this morning, Paul lands in prison. He was charged with disrupting the economy, and caught the ire of the Roman magistrate. When he left prison he should have gotten as far from Philippi as he could. Instead, he went to Lydia, who welcomed the Jewish felon. Her faith made a home and begat a community.

Lydia *heard* God's word and did God's work, and she's remembered for it. Her story speaks of the surprise, challenge, hope, and promise of a life like ours. Which is to say, I find Lydia important at least in part because she reminds me of this congregation.

Somewhere between Lud's three-decade tenure at Westminster and the beginning of Ben's time as head of staff, we decided to update our branding. After a host of conversations about our historic commitment to the study of scripture, community

outreach, and education, and with the patient leadership of branding guru Bill Donohue, we landed on two ideas that we felt best described our congregation: “Open minds” and “open hearts.” Both concepts were central to Westminster’s self-understanding, but on their own each seemed incomplete. In the particular world of this church *Open minds open hearts* could not be two separate things. It’s a complete sentence and a causative statement. Westminster is a church where open minds do work.

Because we are open to God’s word here in worship,
our hearts are open to God’s world.

That’s not two things.
And it’s not vague, empty speak,
it’s how God works to form a people:
An open mind and a transformed heart are how Lydia made room,
and how, unbeknownst to her, she made history.
Her legacy is our challenge —
a conversion that prompted world-changing hospitality,
an open door, a table set for whomever might come, a place of safety,
from which the church was nurtured. *Prevailing. Bringing in.*

An otherwise unremarkable woman living under Roman occupation — a woman surely both sinned against and sinning — responded to the call of God by offering hospitality, by creating community, and by drawing people together. That is the work of the church, and our singular responsibility.

Lydia is remembered because she allowed God to open her up, because she heard the word and could not be the same, because her heart was broken to the world, and she could not be isolated from it any longer. She approached God’s creation with fists unclenched, receptive to what God gives and generous in using her gifts for others.

Lydia, who dealt in purple cloth, made her living by appeasing the power brokers in Philippi. Purple cloth was expensive, usually reserved for royals and rulers, which means that Lydia was likely selling to the state: to emperors and governors and priests who dealt in extravagance and exclusion. When Lydia turned toward Paul, when the Spirit opened her heart, she chose to serve **people** over power. She used what she had for the Kingdom, for the well-being of God’s community, not for the empire.

And her story, her memory, is ours...or it could be.
One of my favorite cemeteries is in Princeton, New Jersey. Interred next to other presidents of the university is the fire-band Presbyterian preacher Jonathan Edwards, he of “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God.” Edwards is buried near his son-in-law, Aaron Burr, Sr. also a Presbyterian pastor and president of Princeton. Next to Sr. is Jr. His tomb reads thusly:

*Aaron Burr
born February 6, 1756*

died September 14, 1836

*A Colonel in the Army of the Revolution
Vice President of the United States*

Aaron Burr wanted to be remembered for his noble contributions to the Republic. Is that what you remember when you hear his name? No. History took its own course. Despite his efforts, the academic, fighter, and vice-president is remembered because he took his shot.

How we are remembered is beyond our control. Which is why I've come to believe that the best we can hope for is to be remembered like Lydia, which requires a life like hers: hospitable, generous, urgently welcoming, listening, and acting. It requires ceding control to God's vision and God's story.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul reminded the people that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

If you want to put a little Gamecock on your tomb, go for it. I'll give you a "Spurs Up" when I pass by. But perhaps the best thing, the most eternal thing, that we can remember about one another, is that we, like Lydia, got up to God's work, participated in the story that compels us to action, community-care, and service.

The good work is the work of Lydia, who, though she is not named in Paul's four-chapter letter to the church, is nonetheless remembered the benefactor of the Philippian church, the woman whose home and hospitality made way for the Spirit, and who, though she is often forgotten, by her hospitality changed the world. A individual with an openness to God's odd, life-giving word, and an heart open to God's wild, diverse world.

A good work, an open door, a crowded table, and a living God. Would that each of us creates a home here in Greenville where gospel-centered hospitality becomes our legacy and our abiding memory...a world where the best thing that can be said about each of us and about this place is that God got up to something good in us and we with the world were never the same.

— Leigh Stuckey