

Thanking the Church's Foremothers
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Easter 6 (Mother's Day)

This is a day that many preachers dread. I know this is true because of the amount of computer memory used on various blogs asking what is one to do. Mother's day was officially set aside in 1914 by Woodrow Wilson to honor the mothers whose sons had died in war. There are others who claim to have started the day but eventually, Hallmark, florists and others got a hold of it and turned it into a sentimental holiday. I know many women who avoid church on this day, because they want nothing more than to be a mother yet they cannot have children. Others have mothers that just haven't lived up to the Hallmark model, as if that truly was possible. So I want to take a different path this morning by broadening the concept of mothers.

Women mother us in many ways and I want take the time this morning to look at the mothers of the church. The "Church Fathers" have long gotten a lot of press, but in recent years historians are going back to look at the role of those women of the church who have left a lasting mark on our faith. How appropriate that this year we read about Lydia, the merchant and seller of purple cloth on this Mother's Day.

The Council of Jerusalem is now behind the apostles and the issue of who is inside and who is outside is at least settled temporarily. Paul is now traveling all over Syria, Turkey and finally on to Macedonia, which is what we now call Greece. This was an incredible journey in those days. It took a group I went with a full 10 days to visit just half of these places and that was using modern transportation, including airplane, fast ferry and bus.

Lydia is a dealer in purple. This means many things. Lydia was a woman who dealt in the highest circles of society. Purple was a very expensive dye. Made from the purple we find in clams and oyster shells, it was difficult to make and only the wealthiest could afford it¹. In the Roman world only the political elite could wear it.

Paul's mode of operation was to arrive in town. Check out what was happening and then head for the synagogue on the Sabbath. The word for place in the Greek is synonymous with synagogue, yet it is outside the walls, by the river. It is likely that they lacked the ten men required for a synagogue to formally exist. Another clue is the statements in the next story where Paul is denounced as a Jew when they are arguing about the slave women who was cured by Paul of a demon. This however allows Paul to speak to the women as well. If this was a formal synagogue the women might very well have been excluded.

¹ This information comes from Dr. Sheila McGinn, New Testament professor at John Carroll University in Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

Why is Paul in this part of the world. The Spirit of Jesus tells him to go in a vision of a man of Macedonia asking him to come to them. What causes the change of heart in Lydia. The Lord opens her heart and she is willing to receive the word. She responds and invites them into her home. So the first convert in Europe is a woman of means and importance in her community. A woman bold enough to welcome in this new religion and offer her support and assistance to Paul.

Jesus and later the disciples often were supported by women. In the early church there were many important women. Jesus and Paul in particular depended upon them to spread the word. After his conversion experience, Paul was taught the basics of the faith by Prisca and Aquila. In scripture Prisca is always listed first which is very unusual and tells us much about her importance to the early church.

Paul's letter to the Roman's was hand delivered by Phoebe. Delivering the letter was more than just carrying the scroll. The messenger stood in the place of the writer, represented them. The messenger was expected to read the letter publicly to the recipients. Paul not only chose a woman to serve in this role, but commends other women in the letter for their work. During Lent we listed many of the famous women of the church and read about the work they did.

In so many parishes it is the women who are the leaders. I was at a meeting of the Little Neck Churches to talk about their picnic and I was the only male in the room. I can think of any number of parishes where life would grind to a halt without the women of the parish.

In the Episcopal Church in the days before women could sit on vestries or be ordained they organized into the ECW, the Episcopal Church Women. These faithful foremothers knew that there was important work to be done and they would not be shut out of ministry. This group is still an important part of the Episcopal Church. The United Thank Offering or UTO makes millions of dollars in grants to ministries of the Episcopal Church. They support the school in Belize that we have helped along with many other projects that benefit women and children. And the president of the ECW in our diocese, Nancy Smith, is a member here at St. Aidan's.

Over the years as I have listened to people tell their spiritual autobiographies, many mention the women in their lives as the ones who made sure they went to church, even when they didn't want to. Time and time again I hear people thank those women who brought them to church, taught Sunday School and blazed the trail to today's church where we have a woman as our Presiding Bishop. It has not been an easy trail and there are still those who resist.

One of my favorite stories about modern women of the church involves Miss Cora. I first learned about Miss Cora when I was at St. Paul's in Cleveland Heights Ohio. Our rector, the Rev. Nick White in his sermons, often mentioned Miss Cora. He grew up at St. James Leesburg and Miss Cora was one of his Sunday school teachers. She taught Nick many important lessons including the books of the Bible, many Bible stories and the fact that the proper name for the Civil War was the Late Unpleasantness. Now I eventually met Miss

Cora and this meeting will tell you something about her leadership of the church. I did my fieldwork during seminary at St. David's in Ashburn. The head of the altar guild was an elderly woman whose name was Cora. I had been there a few weeks and she was asking me about my background and when she learned I had come from St. Paul's she said, "Well my stars that's little Nicky's church isn't it." Now mind you little Nicky was 65 years old at the time she said this. I replied, "Are you the famous Miss Cora?" She beamed a great smile and said yes she had been Nick's Sunday school teacher. I asked her why she was at St. David's instead of up the road at St. James?

"Well," she explained. "When the people of St. James decided to plant St. David's in Ashburn they asked if a group of St. James people would be willing to help lead the new parish. She decided that no church plant would be successful without a good altar guild. So she left the parish where she had been a member for almost 80 years to help start a brand new church and make sure the altar guild knew how to set a proper altar. I can't imagine what it was like to serve under her, but what an amazing witness to the spread of the Gospel. She truly was a mother who helped give birth to what is now a large healthy parish in Northern Virginia.

I suspect, no I know that the church through the millennia has been filled with people like Lydia, Phoebe and Miss Cora and I thank God for all of them.

So who have been the mothers to you in your church journey? Take a moment this Mother's Day and thank those women who have formed and led your faith journey. Thank all those women who have been faithful witnesses who have helped spread the gospel.