



SINGLES' SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, October 31, 2010

Herbert Robinson Marbury, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Lection - Acts 16:11-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 11) We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, (v. 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. (v. 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. (v. 14) A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper 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. (v. 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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Predominantly, single black men and women fill the pews of African American churches across the United States. They faithfully serve the church in a variety of capacities from communion stewards to greeters, from ushers to choir members, from Sunday school teachers to trustees, and from worship leaders to clergypersons. However, rather than appreciating single persons for their service to the church or for their life accomplishments, many churches still view them as perpetually inadequate, incomplete women and men.

Singles' Sunday is an opportunity to explore the possibilities of faithful living for what perhaps is a majority of members (ages 18-108) in most African American churches. In other words, singles are diverse. They are members who are pre-married, members who were once married and now divorced, members whose spouses have transitioned to eternal life, and members who simply have never been interested in the married lifestyle. In open and affirming churches, they include members who cannot legally marry. Singles' Sunday ought not be identified with any particular age group. For example, celebrating Singles' Sunday with Young Adult Sunday reduces singlehood to a necessary stage on the progression toward marriage. Such a view reinforces the common idea that single people are incomplete until marriage, flawed after divorce, and poor, pitiable persons after the death of a spouse. Rather, Singles' Sunday is a marvelous liturgical opportunity for African American churches to explore with singles what it means to live full spiritual, intellectual, sexual, emotional, and above all faithful lives.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Acts 16:11-15

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

“She/He is just what you need!” As a young pastor, I experienced first-hand the church's discomfort with single people. It was a rare week that some older member did not offer up his niece or her daughter or some younger member did not offer to introduce me to her best girlfriend, assuring me that this person was just what I needed. These well-intentioned “mothers” and some “fathers” knew the challenges I faced serving the church as a single person. While their “offerings” were gestures of love meant to protect me, they also underscored the church's difficulty accepting single persons as whole people. Beyond clergy office, accomplished single people are sometimes denied positions of responsibility in the Church in favor of less accomplished married persons, who are assumed to be more “mature.” In many of these churches, the appropriate role of a single person is simply to quietly observe the model of married folk or to aid married folk in the work of the Church until they themselves take vows.

“When are you going to settle down?” Is there is something “unsettled” about singlehood?

A second notion is that because people are single, they live lives rife with sexual peril. Single persons are believed to spend the majority of their time pursuing available partners and are thus unsuitable social company for married persons. Their activities pose a danger to married men and women who socialize with them. Some of my most difficult but teachable moments as a pastor arose when a married man raised suspicion about his wife's single girlfriend or a married woman who became concerned because her husband had single male friends. Both were

concerned that their spouse's single friends would "get them into trouble." Often, this notion is expressed in the admonition that a single person needs to be married in order "to make an honest man or woman" out of them. The implication is that there is something naturally wayward about singleness. Sadly, as a response, many churches deploy singles ministries to mainly focus on controlling the sexual activity of their single members until they are safely married off. Or, they look with suspicion at those who are single and happy. "It's not good for a man (or woman) to be alone" they implore. It does not dawn on them that there are satisfied and happy singles in the Bible and if they do reflect upon such people (Paul and Lydia being two of them), they want all single people to know: "They were not having sex, they were living for the Lord," as if they know this definitively. This attitude suggests that the most important issue for all single Christians is whether or not we are having sex.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Today's biblical story emphasizes the normalcy of singleness. The text is short. Its matter-of-fact presentation of the events, ignores what may be our most pressing questions: Where was her husband? Was she a single mother? Why didn't Paul encourage her to put down her business pursuits and get married straightaway? How could two unmarried men spend a night in the home of a single woman?

These, however, are *our* questions; they are not the Bible's concerns. Instead, the writer simply takes Lydia's accomplished life for granted and treats her marital status as inconsequential. She is a successful businesswoman who heads a household. She directs her own life and makes decisions by which those in her household must abide. Unlike our modern-day nuclear family, both kinship ties and economic interests structured a Roman household. Lydia's household includes blood relatives, employees, and servants. She built a thriving enterprise as a merchant of purple cloth, a luxury item sought by the wealthy and status-conscious. Upon hearing Paul and Silas, she discerns for herself the value of their discourse and the truth of the Gospel they preached. As the head of the household, she hears God's call not only for herself but also for those under her charge and leads her entire household to be baptized. Ultimately, Lydia's home becomes a municipal center for Christian worship.

The story also models relationships for single people. In his encounter with Lydia, Paul's masculinity is not threatened by her achievements. He does not demean her to enhance his status. Rather, they engage each other with mutual respect in dialogue, character, and intention. Such is the witness of the Holy Spirit!

Many who are not married have internalized negative attitudes about singlehood. They have come to believe that singlehood is a defective condition and pursue marriage at all cost, neglecting the nurture of their hopes and dreams, forgoing the development of their full potential, and delaying financial achievement. Long-time single women in particular are berated because "they can't get a man." Instead of celebrating a return to single life at the end of a relationship, post-relationship women often find themselves blamed because "they can't keep a man." For many in the Church, getting and keeping "a man" become the goals that women should pursue at almost any cost. In these situations, it is not uncommon for women to make huge sacrifices to remain "marriageable." For some young women, it means avoiding the purchase of a home as a

single person and paying rent for years despite their financial viability. Other women stifle their professional potential by forgoing promotions to executive level positions. Still others forgo graduate degrees. Ultimately, educational, financial, and professional achievements are easily traded in order to shed the stigma of singleness.

While the Church still understands singlehood as abnormal, the real-lived experiences in our communities speak otherwise. Our world no longer produces the conditions for marriage as the natural or even the optimal goal for many people; marriage is one among many faithful choices for life. **Perhaps instead of understanding single persons as the exception and marriage as the norm, singleness ought to be a faithful norm.**

For most Americans, the majority of life is lived as a single person. According to 2003 US Census, only 43% of African Americans marry. Recently, opportunities for college and graduate education have increased the average age for marriage from 22 in 1960 to 29 in 2000. For those who do marry after 28 years of singlehood, the tragic reality is that almost 50% of marriages end in divorce within the first five years.

Today, single African American women, who courageously and competently rear young women and men to be responsible adults, head the majority of African American households. On the other hand, of those men and women who enjoy healthy marriages throughout their lifetime, one spouse will find himself or herself returning to single life at the transition of a partner. Currently, African American women outlive black men by an average of six years. For the majority of African American Christians, singlehood is the norm; it is their state of being for the majority of their lives.

Celebration

Most remarkable is that even after being baptized, Paul does not encourage Lydia to get married or to turn her attention from her life's work to pursue a husband. Rather, *she* prevails upon *him!* She demonstrates to him that in singleness is completeness! In singleness is faithfulness. Paul then encourages her in the faith! He tells her to keep on keeping on! Keep on doing what you are doing—employing people, building your business, living out your God-given potential, living a faithful life, and leading others to Christ!

By presenting Lydia as a single head of household, the writer affirms her life, her work, and her accomplishments. Lydia's example encourages single men and women everywhere to hear God's call for themselves. **Marriage is not a prerequisite for full, faithful living; it is but one faithful option.** God does not need single persons to delay fulfilling their God-given potential in order to be married. Rather, God calls all of us to be whole, healthy, and complete regardless of our marital status. We were complete when God made us.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: A ship sailing from port to port, a gate near a river where women are praying, Lydia's household, Lydia and her household being baptized, Paul going to Lydia's house;

Sounds: Women praying, Paul testifying about Christ, people being baptized in a river; and

Colors: The purple cloth sold by Lydia. When describing purple items in a sermon or during other teaching moments, remember that there are numerous shades of purple.