

Darleen Pryds

The Swedenborgian Church of San Francisco

May 9, 2010

Acts 16:9-15

John 14: 22-29

Prevailing Faith

Happy Mother's day! Ever since 1914 we have celebrated Mother's Day as a public holiday in this country. Often on this day mothers are given a special recognition in church and are asked to stand for public recognition. With all due respect to all the mothers in the room today, I'd like to honor mother's day a little differently. I'd like to ask all the people in this room who were given birth to by a mother to either stand or raise your hand.... You got that right...all who have been birthed into this world by a mother, please acknowledge that. Look around. All of us were born into this world by a mother. Thank you. Please be seated.

We have each received this profound gift of life which is ours to live out as we discern throughout our lives. Ultimately we are more than the child born of a mother; more than a child of a mother and father. We come into this world as a child of God. Scripture is full of references of god as Father. And the Christian tradition especially from its medieval period is rich with theology and spirituality focusing on God as Mother.

On this Mother's Day I would like to honor mothers by looking at this privilege and honor we all carry: having been born, we are a child of God.

What does this mean to be a child of God?

I'd like to explore this by way of the story of Lydia in our first reading. When I first read this story about her, I admit that I didn't think much about Lydia. After all, sometimes

Scriptures lack gripping details and descriptions. But here is a reference to a woman by name. That alone makes the passage special. As I considered more deeply what IS here in Acts, I realized that there is enough to flesh out the story about Lydia as a child of God if we take the time to reflect deeply.

Lydia was a woman of some financial means; she was actually a rather wealthy business woman who traded in luxury items of purple goods. She was also a woman of faith, called in the book of Acts “a worshipper of God.” Even before Paul and the disciples got to her, she worshipped God, as a faithful woman. And, she yearned to understand even more about the Divine. She clearly was not content to remain static or stuck in her faith, but longed to grow closer to God, to learn more about God, and to leave her heart open so she could heed the words of teachers like Paul to whom she listened apparently with a great amount of desire. The Scriptures don’t give us detail here, but we read that Lydia received Paul’s teachings and was then baptized as a follower and believer in Christ. If you have ever attended the baptism of an adult, you can reflect on the emotional impact this likely had on Lydia. Her conversion was a personal response to feeling called by God to know and believe in Jesus as the son of God. She had opened herself up to ongoing conversion in her life and responded by saying yes, to baptism.

But she didn’t just stop there: she somehow facilitated the baptism of her entire household.

Perhaps she prevailed upon her household like she prevailed upon Paul and the disciples. What does that look like and feel like when the woman of the house prevails upon the household?

The verb sounds a little negative to our ears. To prevail can mean to compel or persuade, often through long coercion--dare I say it, nagging. When I was a child I would prevail upon my mother to cook spaghetti for dinner with great frequency...daily, in fact, by hinting, by suggesting, and more frequently, pestering. In general the verb "to prevail upon" seems tedious.

But there is a deeper meaning to the word that is in play in the Scripture passage about Lydia. Our English verb comes from the Latin *praevalere*, meaning "to be stronger."

Lydia made her household stronger through her own faith and her response to faith.

In turn she prevailed in faith upon her teachers, Paul and the disciples. She made them stronger through her own response of faith to their teaching. And by her humble invitation to them: "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." She opened up her house to them and allowed them into her home which in turn became a center of faith....a church.

With this deeper reflection, suddenly this passage from Acts sounds different to my ears. And I wonder if it sounds different to you. By teasing out details that are implied in the brief text, the name Lydia is no longer a vague reference to a woman. She has become a lay woman of faith, who profoundly influenced those around her all because she yearned to know God more and more. She responded to her new teachers in faith, and in turn made her teachers stronger in their faith through witnessing her lived expression of faith.

In this light Lydia can be seen as an example of how a child of God lives her life: yearning faith; always growing in faith and curious to know more; and giving others the gift of faith. She is a child of God who responds in turn by giving birth to faith, in other words.

Isn't it appropriate to celebrate Mother's Day, then, by recognizing in each of us the capacity to be born into faith and to give birth to faith through our lives?

To seal our own awareness of being born into a life of faith, I would like to close with the words of Rev. Kathleen O'Keefe Reed, a mother and ordained Lutheran minister.

At the Crowning Anointed by Kathleen O'Keefe Reed

At the crowning of my first born  
I was prepared for the pain, and the blood,  
and the water.

But no one had told me about the vernix caeseosa, omitted was any mention that my daughter would come into the world anointed with a thick white coating of oil all over my skin.

My first child came into the world like all children come sliding into home, pre-greased, pre-anointed.

At Baptism, at our second birth, we are anointed with the Spirit and again with oil.

Why?

Because royalty in ancient days were anointed with oil at their coronations.

But why?

Because at our first crownings  
we were anointed in the womb.

And so in Baptism we are salved  
for salvation's sake.

Greased so that the Devil won't be able  
to get a good grip.

Balmed so that we can walk  
in the desert without burning.

Creamed so that we can swim the channel  
without freezing to death.

Oiled so that we will be able to slip through  
the eye of the needle.

Child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit  
and marked with the cross of Christ,  
forever.

Child of God, you have been greased  
by the Holy Spirit.

Greased  
as in greased lightening.

On this Mother's Day, may we each be grateful for the gift of life we've been given and this  
sacred anointing with which our mothers birthed us.