

You are the Message

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When I think of saints in the ancient tradition of the church, I tend to think of people who gave up everything... or who died a terrible death while proclaiming their love of God. Historically, saints like this tend to be called “red” saints. Lydia of Phillipi is not a saint in that tradition, but is in the tradition of “green” saints. These saints are ones that put their lives to an even greater use for the love of God.

In the book of Acts, Lydia is said to be Paul’s first European convert to Christianity. We don’t know a lot about Lydia, but it appears that she was a wealthy merchant, a dealer of expensive purple cloth. She had Paul baptize her and her entire household, and then offered to let Paul stay in her home. Tradition says that Lydia then hosted the first house church in what is now modern-day Turkey.

So Lydia was not called to leave her home to become a disciple. Lydia was not asked to give up all of her belongings or her family or their home. Instead, Lydia became a follower of Christ by continuing in the work she had been doing and sharing some of the proceeds of her work with other followers of Jesus and Paul. Unlike the rich young ruler that spoke to Jesus, Lydia’s call was not to “give up,” but to “add on.”

Mrs. Mary Rising is a closer-to-contemporary saint, but she is equally unusual in my expectation of those we name as saints. Pastor Larry has already shared a fair amount of her story with us, but I am going to remind us of just how unusual Mary was. Mary was the wife of one of the pastors of this church. Unlike many other clergy wives, however, Mary was unable to direct the choir or teach Sunday School or play the piano or make casseroles for church potluck and funeral dinners.

Mary was blind and had rheumatoid arthritis, before there were treatments available to help with the debilitating nature of the disease. Mary was frozen into a sitting position, and could only move her fingers enough to hold a stick to brush off flies. It would have been easy for her to stay at home feeling sorry for herself, caught in the prison of her body. But Mary’s mind was sharp and her faith was deep. And she was blessed to find herself in this congregation where strong young men would carry Mary and her chair up the front steps of the church—and where others helped in her care.

People loved Mary and wanted to help take care of her in many different ways. One of the ways this care was expressed was bringing home bells from the mission field. Pastor Larry signaled our prayer for peace time today with one of her bells. I imagine that receiving the bells would have been fun for Mary, but it became so much more as well; the bells became a tool for ministry because Mary would use them for raising money for mission. Someone would ring one of her bells, and Mary would tell the story of the bell and of the place from whence it had come and the ministry done in that place. Apportionments—Mission Shares—were paid from the proceeds of such programs.

I cannot begin to imagine the courage and imagination it took to conceive of this call and then to do this work. Mary truly is one of the amazing saints of this congregation, and someone who can inspire all of us. Not that any one of us is called to live and serve exactly in this way, but she serves as a reminder that all of us have something that we can give in service to God through the life of the church.

And in that tradition of Mary the Storyteller, I wanted to share with you a mission story I heard just recently (*ring Mary’s bell*). Last night I had the opportunity to hear the story of Edna Ruth Byler. 65 years ago, Edna Ruth had gone on a trip to Puerto Rico, and was overwhelmed by the poverty of the people she saw. While there, she observed many women doing beautiful needle work—but they had no place to sell the work they did.

Not one to let an opportunity pass, Edna had an idea; she filled her suitcases with their handwork and brought it back to the states. She began to sell the items to her friends... and when she ran out of items, she sent to Puerto Rico for more. Filling up her trunk with needlework, Edna Ruth drove around Pennsylvania selling items for the women of Puerto Rico.

Success followed her efforts and soon she had hand-made items from Haiti... and then from Palestine. Pretty soon, Edna Ruth Byler was working with artisans from a dozen different countries, selling their goods from trade shows and special events. A little over 30 years ago, a tipping point was reached and a number of stores opened, carrying items from developing countries around the world. The name of the stores is Ten Thousand Villages, and the Lincoln store by that name is celebrating their 30th anniversary. 84 other stores are now part of this ministry of people helping people. Edna Ruth answered God’s call in a creative way and has helped to transform the world.

In our Gospel lesson today, the Pharisees were attempting to trick Jesus into making a political error or a theological mistake; Jesus took their question and challenged the Pharisees to name and claim their allegiance. He suggested that they could serve Caesar by carrying his image on their coins, or they could serve God because they bore God's image in their very DNA. "We cannot do both," Jesus proclaimed, and it is up to each one of us to make the choice, perhaps on a daily basis.

Listen again to the words of Paul—the great preacher and evangelist of the early Christian Church as he spoke to the disciples in Thessalonica: "It is clear to us, friends, that God not only loves you very much but also has put God's hand on you for something special. When the Message we preached to you came to you, it wasn't just words. Something happened in you. The Holy Spirit put steel in your convictions.⁵ You paid careful attention to the way we lived among you, and determined to live that way yourselves. In imitating us, you imitated Jesus...⁷ Do you know that all over the provinces... believers look up to you? The word has gotten around. Your lives are echoing the Master's Word... The news of your faith in God is out. We don't even have to say anything anymore—you *are* the message!"

We look at the saints of old and can proclaim how God has called them to do great things, but do we recognize the ways in which we also are called and serve God? Whether it is in Peacemaking Workshops, serving food at Matt Talbott Kitchen, creating quilts, watching babies in the nursery, singing in the choir, serving in the office, feeding families that are grieving, working a garage sale for missions, serving on boards of agencies that care for others, advocating for political change that will benefit the poor and marginalized... in all these ways we can see that there are saints among us and that we are responding to God's call.

Jesus invites us to give God that which belongs to God. He understood from the oldest teachings that his people were God's people, created in God's image, each one marked by God. "To whom do we belong?" Jesus asks. Why, we belong to God and should, therefore give our lives over to God.

Far too often, we think of the model of the 12 disciples called by Jesus who left behind everything to follow him. Or, we think of the rich young ruler who could not bear to give everything away in order to follow Jesus. The good news is that we have seen a couple of other saints who offer different, creative models of what it means to be followers of Jesus... and of what it means to offer our lives to God.

The Pharisees were perplexed by Jesus' answer to their question, and if the truth be told, we are often just as confused. Fortunately, we have the lives of saints who have gone before us to show us ways in which we can turn our lives over to God. While that can be reassuring for us, we often forget that we have a similar responsibility to be models of service to those who follow after us as well. Today we name Lydia and Mary and Edna Ruth as saints, but in future generations others will follow after us. May our lives be lived in such a way that we, too, are called saints.

Paul proclaims that a life lived in this way means that we become The Message. Others have remarked that our lives may be the only Bible that others read. May those who see our lives truly find the word of God in our living. Thanks be to God. Amen.