This morning we continue our sermon series on Six Disciples of Jesus who were not well known but whose lives in the faith offer inspiration and lessons for our discipleship.

Today we meet another woman, Lydia, who provides us an example of what Hospitality is all about.

Mention the word “hospitality” and a few things may come to mind.

- We might think about the hospitality industry. Expedia.com and all those other sites that want your leisure dollars. All the hotels and motels and cruise lines. It’s big business! All those folks competing for your vacation time, and your money.

- We might also think about how we want to offer hospitality when people come to visit us, how we want to be good hosts: welcoming, gracious, helpful to our guests.

- Or maybe we’ve had a bad experience with hospitality while traveling. For instance: I took my family to see Niagara Falls a few years ago. I paid extra for a hotel room that advertised it had a view of the Falls. When we checked in and went up to the room, we found our Falls view: If you stood and looked out the window, then leaned as far to your left as you could without falling down, yes, you could see the Falls. Technically, we had a Falls view, but let’s try a little truth in advertising while we’re at it.

Whatever we think about hospitality, today’s message contains an example of how one woman became a gracious host to the Apostle Paul. First off, let’s find out what we can about Lydia:

- She was from a town in modern day Turkey (Thyatira) but she was living in the Roman town of Philippi, located in the northern part of Greece.

- Lydia was drawn to Philippi by her business for she was a dealer in purple dyes and cloth. Before you ask: no, she was not a Ravens fan.
She was a businesswoman who dealt in one of the high-end luxury items of her day. We might think of her as the Martha Stewart of her time. Purple was the color of royalty and the upper classes. It was very expensive back in the day.

- Lydia was what we would call upper middle class. She was well off financially. She owned her own house in Philippi. She must have had lots of wealthy clients and fellow merchants. Lydia really had it all. Looking at her, you would think she was “living the Roman dream.”

But for Lydia, there was something missing.

For all the wealth and the well-to-do lifestyle, she still lacked something.

We get an idea this was so because we first meet her at a gathering of women at a “place of prayer” outside the town of Philippi where she is worshipping with some Jewish women. Lydia is described in our reading as a “worshipper of God”; that is, someone who is attracted to God by what she saw in the Jewish faith.

- She herself was not a Jew.
- She was with people who worshipped the God of Israel.

Lydia was someone we would call a seeker, someone who’s looking for God.

She must have seen something in the God of the Jews that spoke to her, told her there was more to life than her upper-middle class existence and the uncertain promises of the Greek and Roman gods.

And then, she met Paul.

The Apostle Paul was traveling to Greece for the first time. He had a vision that told him to go over to Europe and preach the gospel to the people he encountered there.

Together with Timothy, Silas and (maybe) Luke, Paul made the trip to Philippi where he encountered this group of women worshippers.
Paul spoke to them. He told them about Jesus and how he is the Messiah, the One the Jews were looking for who would set the world to rights. As she listened, God opened her heart to believe.

Note how this reads: **The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.**

Paul is not the one who opened her heart—God did that.

Paul spoke the words but it was God who opened her heart to Jesus.

We get this idea that winning people to Christ is all up to us; that we need to be the ones who do all the work; that it’s up to us to persuade or convince someone to follow Jesus.

But the truth is that God is the one who does the work.

God was already at work in Lydia’s life.

The attraction she felt to the Jewish faith was God speaking into her life, telling her there was something more for her. Her association with the Jewish women of the town was God’s way to bring her closer to God.

Finally, when she heard Paul speak words of love and peace and hope, and how she could find those things in Jesus, she understood.

She understood God had been reaching out to her, offering grace, love, acceptance.

**God opened Lydia’s heart.**

**And in return, Lydia opened her house to Paul and his friends.**

She had herself and her whole household baptized. And she insisted that Paul and his companions come and stay with her.

Lydia opened her home because she understood Paul’s message about God:

- That we were once alienated from God, strangers, others, all because of sin. We built up walls between us and God.
- But Jesus tore down the wall that divides us from God.
We were strangers once on account of sin. But now we are welcomed as friends, family even. Because God welcomed us into the family of God, we need to welcome strangers, aliens, others. People who aren’t like us. We welcome them because Christ welcomes us into the family of faith.

Fred Craddock was a preacher and professor of preaching. He told a story about a time when he was a young preacher fresh out of seminary, he pastored a small church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. At that time, Oak Ridge was growing fast. Many of the newcomers lived in a mobile home park located near the church. The trailer park was packed with newcomers, including a large number of children. Fred saw all those new people and thought his church ought to reach out to them. So at the next Board meeting Fred recommended a plan to reach out to the newcomers. "Oh, I don't know" said the chairman of the board. "They might not fit in here very well." Fred said, "But they live right next to our church. I think we should invite them to worship with us." But Fred got resistance to the idea. They finally decided to table the discussion and deal with it at their next business meeting.

At that meeting a member said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church you have to own property in the county." "I'll second that motion," said another man. Fred was shocked and spoke against it. But in the end, the motion passed. As a result, no effort was made to reach out to the newcomers. Soon thereafter Fred left that church. Twenty years later, Fred and his wife were driving past Oak Ridge on a trip through Tennessee. Since he was single when he served that church, his wife had never seen it. So Fred decided to show it to her. As they drove to the church, Fred told his wife that painful story about the church refusing to reach out to newcomers. It took a while to find the church. Lots of new roads and homes had been built in the area. But they finally found the spot. The beautiful white frame church was sitting there as always, but something was different. There was a big parking lot out front full of cars, trucks, motor homes and even motorcycles. As they pulled into the lot they saw a big sign in front of the church. It said, "BBQ: All You Can Eat." It was a restaurant! Fred
and his wife went inside and the place was packed with all kinds of people—white and black and Hispanic. Rich and poor. Southerners and northerners. Fred said to his wife, "It's a good thing this isn't a church anymore. If it were, these people would not be allowed in."

This story is a great example of how not to practice hospitality. It also shows the consequences of not welcoming the stranger.

- Real hospitality is uncomfortable.
- Real hospitality is risky.
- Real hospitality costs something.

Lydia took a big risk by inviting Paul and his friends to stay at her home. They were outsiders, foreigners with strange ideas.

As their story goes on, Paul and friends were arrested for disturbing the peace, sent to jail, and finally released.

As their host, Lydia ran the risk of being associated with Paula and his strange ideas. The crowds of people could have turned on her.

But she was a believer now.

She practiced hospitality, despite the risks.

We can practice real hospitality when we take a risk. The dangers for us today are not the same as they were for Lydia, but hospitality will cost us.

- The cost might be time, writing an encouraging note to someone.
- It might be developing a relationship with a family member we’ve kept our distance from. That can be uncomfortable.
- Or maybe it’s simpler than that: like making room on the road for the driver ahead of us.

Real hospitality is risky. It has to cost something.

Once upon a time, there lived two pigeons. They were husband and wife. They spent their day looking for food. In the evening they would come and rest on their favorite tree in the forest.

One evening, the wife returned home early. A usual she was waiting for her husband, when suddenly it started raining. She started to
worry. “Where are you, my dear? You’re never get so late,” she whispered to herself. Just then she saw a bird-catcher coming towards her. In a cage he had a pigeon. It was her husband. “OH no, what shall I do now? How can I help my husband,” she said. She desperately tried to distract the bird-catcher by flapping her wings, but all in vain. Soon, it stopped raining. “Brrr! It is so cold,” said the bird-catcher. His clothes were wet. He decided to sit under the same tree where the two pigeons lived. The poor wife sat by her husband’s cage. And she started to cry. The husband said. “Do not feel sad, dear. We now have a guest. This man is shivering and hungry. He needs your help.” Hearing this, the wife flew around getting dry twigs. She made a fire for the bird-catcher. Then she looked at the bird-catcher and said, “You are our guest, since I have no food to offer, I will jump into this fire. In few minutes I will become your meal for tonight.” By now, the bird-catcher was overwhelmed by the hospitality of the humble pigeon couple. He at once stopped the wife jumping into the fire. He opened the cage and set the husband free. “I have been cruel and selfish. I will never trap any bird in my net again,” said the bird-catcher and went away. The two pigeons were happy to be reunited.

Jesus Christ performed the ultimate act of hospitality.

Jesus opened his arms to welcome us into His Kingdom. And by doing so, he laid down his life on the Cross; for us.

This is Good News for us—Great News, in fact.

It’s great news because Jesus took the risk to open the kingdom of God.

Real hospitality has to cost something.

How do we welcome strangers? How does Christ welcome? Meal…body and blood.