

Faith, Witness, and Hospitality

Something rather amazing happens when you put a mat and a frame on a piece of art or photography. It happens when you paint the window frames and trim in a room, or when you put a border on a quilt, or when you plant marigolds around the edge of your vegetable garden. It happens when you put a prologue and an epilogue around a book manuscript, or a scarf around your neck. It happens when you put a prelude and postlude around a service of worship or a line of topstitching around a lapel.

The amazing thing that happens is that the thing you encircle with something else suddenly looks different or sounds different. Take the artwork as an example. As you stand at the framing studio, trying on different mat colors, the colors in the artwork shift into the foreground or into the background. When you have settled on the mat, the frame does its magic, too: a dark frame looks quite different from a light one; a sleek metal edge looks entirely unlike a carved wooden one, and clear Plexiglas makes the art float on the wall. And yes, of course, the wall makes a difference, too.

The story we just heard about Lydia and her household from the 16th chapter of the book of Acts is a kind of frame, too. Here, near the beginning of the chapter, she meets Paul who has come outside of the city gates of Philippi searching for a place to worship. The author of Acts is a little vague about the place of worship, and mentions only the women who are there. Of these, only Lydia, the “seller of purple goods,” is named. [A brief aside: I wrote an exegetical paper about this chapter when I was in seminary; I choose this particular passage precisely because Lydia was a seller of purple cloth]. Lydia’s conversion is prompted by God opening her heart to the words of Paul, and she is promptly baptized, along with all of her household. At that, she invites all of them to her home.

What follows is the “artwork” of this chapter – a story in three parts, some of which we will hear next week. Briefly, here’s what happens: Paul and Silas get in trouble by casting a demon out of a slave girl who was earning money for her owner by telling fortunes; they are arrested and put in prison, from which they escape when an earthquake opens the cell doors; and they convert and baptize the jailer and his entire household. After all of this, they go back to Lydia’s home again.

When we studied this passage in Bible study on Tuesday, Marge Tarr suggested that Lydia’s story is a cautionary tale of hospitality for new church members: one day she was quietly praying outside the city walls, the next day she was baptized, and the day after that she had a church in her house. Marge is right, of course: this is a story of hospitality as well as of conversion, and extending hospitality often extends us in ways that we would never have expected.

Lydia's hospitality, in particular, framed the other adventures that Paul and Silas had in the city of Philippi. We understand what happened to them somewhat differently than we would if they had just arrived in town and been thrown into jail. We know that they have friends, that they are tied to these friends by the strong bonds of new religious belief and fervor. We know (because we have Paul's letter to the Philippians in the New Testament) that there will soon be a church there, and that Paul will keep in touch with the members. When we get to the story about the earthquake (again, that's next week), we will understand that the people in the story saw this event as a miracle, as a sign of God's presence with them. Without Lydia, the earthquake would have been just an earthquake.

We have earthquakes in our lives, too, and the kind of faith that we have and the kind of faith community we belong to, form the frame that helps us understand what has happened to us. That frame often provides a strong contrast with the background of our popular culture.

For example, the popular culture treats children as young consumers. Most dramatically, television programming for children is designed to sell them toys, food, and gadgets. Increasingly, advertisements also target children as choice makers for other products used by their families (even automobiles!). The value of child, in this way of thinking, is the economic value of the choices that s/he makes or influences. Now put a different frame around children, the one that we invoked a few minutes ago when Everett was baptized. We name children as offspring of God, entrusted to human families so as to grow in faith and wisdom. We make a commitment, as a faith community, to love, support, and care for each child who is brought for baptism; and we also make the wider commitment to love, support, and care for all children.

Another example comes from the increasingly popular "green" movement to protect the environment and reduce the extent of climate change. Much of the hoopla around this movement is also economic: if we don't change our ways, we won't have enough energy, enough food, enough consumer goods for the future. But now put the frame of faith around this issue, and we are talking about the stewardship of God's gifts to us. Our motivation is to serve God by caring for creation, not just to serve ourselves by extending our greed for an extra generation or two.

One final example: our culture tells us that leaders are people who are strong, loud, decisive, and self-confident. Enormous amounts of time and energy are spent identifying people who have those qualities and training them to run business, schools, and other institutions. If we put a Christian frame around the question of leadership, however, the picture shifts dramatically. In our faith, leaders are people who are servants of others, people who use their skills unselfishly in ways that they called by God to do. We value discernment – listening for God's voice and God's guidance – over willful decision making. We care more about people making the best and most faithful use of the skills and talents that they have than we do about scolding them for not being good at something else.

The use of frames is not limited to Christian faith, of course. You may know George Lakoff's book "Don't Think of an Elephant" which has the provocative subtitle, "Know Your Values and Frame the Debate." For Lakoff, the language we use to describe problems and solutions is a powerful determinant of how the debate will unfold. Just like a picture frame or a border, the words we choose illuminate some concerns and values and shadow others. He argues that debates about politics and public policy are often won and lost by how they are framed.

Counseling and psychotherapy also focus on frames. One of the first tasks in therapy is to redefine a unsolvable dilemma into a solvable problem. As the work progresses, the job of the counselor is often to present alternative frames to the client – other ways of seeing and understanding something that has been disturbing his life or happiness.

And sometimes plain old "good advice" depends upon frames. When our fun is interrupted by a storm, someone is sure to remind us that the farmers need the rain.

When a person is in a "good frame of mind," she is clear and healthy, realistic and hopeful. When a person is in a "good frame of spirit," he/she can clearly see reality in the framework of faith and community and service. Lydia's hospitality provided that frame for Paul and Silas; may our hospitality provide a faith-filled frame and framework for every traveler who finds the way to our door.

Prayer for May 13, 2007

Almighty and everlasting God, creator of all things seen and unseen, hear now our silent prayers, as we open our hearts to you in the sacred quietness.

God of faith and hope, we bring before you our prayers for those we have named this morning – we especially remember ... Bring to each of them the gifts of mercy and grace that are most needed, according to your wisdom and love.

Holy One, we pray this morning for all the people who have mothered us, both women and men – those who birthed us, those who raised us, those who loved, challenged, and corrected us.

We are grateful to you, our divine parent, for all of the people who have stepped into our lives to bring your love to us in human form. We thank you for the faith and fortitude they have shown, for the sacrifices and compromises they have made on our behalf, and for lessons they have taught us. Bless each of these, and fill them with the knowledge of the ways that they have contributed to our lives.

We acknowledge with special compassion those people whose care for us was limited by their own shortcomings and by the events and complications of their own lives. Bless them for their loving intentions, and give us loving hearts to receive their gifts gratefully, even as we also acknowledge our disappointment or loss.

We thank you, too, Gracious God, for the opportunity to offer nurture, encouragement, and mentoring to others. Help us all – men and women, old and young – to demonstrate the best of what mothering is: love, discipline, hope, and health. Forgive us when we fall short of these ideals, and give us persistence and patience to continue these relationships.

In a world where women's work is often disrespected, underpaid, unrecognized, and devalued, we ask your particular blessing on the women who serve you and others faithfully, and on the men who respect, reward, recognize, and value them.

All these things we pray in the name of the one who honored his own mother and invited women into the ministry of the church, even Jesus the Christ, and we pray together now in the words that he taught us ...