

# Workplace Faith

Acts 16:11-15

By

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May 9, 2010 — Mother's Day

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

A few years ago, an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* about a group of marketing geniuses who were sitting around discussing Mother's Day and trying to generate sales.<sup>1</sup> They were surrounded in the boardroom by still photos of previous years' campaigns, when they had successfully stimulated sales of a million bottles of perfume and 10,000 white silk nightgowns. But this year the portraits evoked little more than yawns and silence. There was a vacuum of ideas. Finally a woman slipped into the meeting 35 minutes late. She had just left her daughter at daycare and her son at school, and stopped to fix the run in her pantyhose with nail polish. Grimacing at the pictures around her of idyllic mothers with children sleeping peacefully in their arms she blurted out, "Motherhood is no longer a still-life!"

The chairman threw up his hands and exclaimed, "Well, what do mothers want?" On cue the four mothers present gave the same response, "Time!" None of them had enough of it and all of them wanted more of it. Not a watch, not an alarm clock, not another technological device to "save" time; what they were talking about was generic time – time to have and time to spend and time to share and, rarest of all, time to savor; even time to savor their children.

The beauty of time is that no one ever returns it. Time comes in "one size fits all" and nobody cares if they get the same present again and again. "The problem is," said the chairman, "There's no profit in it." So he came up with the Mother's Home Stress Test for \$14.95.

Time! Not easy to find time these days. And another question of time has to do with duration. How long does one mother? When do you get to finally retire from that job, maybe with a gold watch for all your troubles? Erma Bombeck once wrote, "I have a feeling that when my kids march down the aisle to join in holy wedlock with the persons with whom they are going to share the rest of their lives, I will pass them

<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Ellen, "High-concept Marketing for Mom's Hurry-up World," *Los Angeles Times*, Metro Section May 7, 1993 pp. B7

a clean nose tissue, spit on their shoes, and shout: "They need more work. Give me a minute. I'm not finished yet."<sup>2</sup> She goes on to write, "To some adults, it's like admitting defeat. We are committed to hanging in there until they at least know the basics. They should know that towels belong on a rack and not on the floor. They should know that when they receive the Nobel Prize, they are expected to say 'Thank you,' and maybe follow up with a nice note." Apparently the job of mothering is never really finished.

Our text this morning is about a woman named Lydia, the first Christian convert in Europe. She was a businesswoman in Greece, a dealer in purple cloth and apparently quite successful. (That was long before Greece was on the verge of bankruptcy.) They could use more women like Lydia now because she was known to be a wealthy widow and very likely paid taxes rather than relied on the state. Even in biblical times there were working women outside the home. Lydia is remembered for her incredible hospitality. She was a woman with a heart for God, who heard the message of the Gospel, and responded with generosity. She and her entire household were baptized.

I found myself thinking this week about other women in the history of Western Civilization who did ordinary things in extraordinary ways. Have you ever noticed that lots of people talk about the ways they want to change the world but few want to begin by changing themselves? Lydia's story is one about a small change in herself that led to changes in her household, and eventually to a change that swept through all of Europe. Greatness in life is not essentially about doing great things but about doing ordinary things in extraordinary ways - like parenting or extending hospitality and kindness to others.

Clara Barton made little distinction between her work at home and elsewhere in the world. She first nursed her brother, David, back to health after he fell from the rafters of their barn and then went on to establish an agency to obtain and distribute supplies to the wounded after the First Battle of Bull Run during the Civil War. That agency became the forerunner of the American Red Cross, which she founded, becoming the first President of that organization in 1881. She traveled around the world creating a vision for an international body to care for those caught in conflicts and wars and in need of medical care.

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<sup>2</sup> Bombeck, Erma, "Search-and-Rescue for Mom? Ha!", *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday March 17, 1991, E13

Harriet Tubman was an African-American humanitarian and abolitionist who used the network of the Underground Railroad to assist over seventy slaves to escape to freedom in the North, and to find jobs. Traveling by night and in extreme secrecy, they moved from one safe house to another. No one knew it was Harriet Tubman (Mother Moses as she was called) who went back to Maryland to rescue slaves in 13 expeditions over an eleven year period. Fredrick Douglas wrote, "The difference between us is very marked. Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day – you in the night . . . The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism."<sup>3</sup> Often women have labored in a "private way" like Harriet Tubman without recognition, but their impact has been immeasurable.

Madame Marie Curie was a physicist and Chemist who was a pioneer in the field of radioactivity, for which she won two Nobel Prizes, becoming the first woman Nobel Laureate. She was a French citizen of Polish descent. She studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and has the distinction of giving birth to another Nobel Prize winner. Her daughter, Irene, and son-in-law shared a prize, which makes her family the one with the most Nobel Laureates to date.<sup>4</sup>

Mother Teresa was another Nobel Laureate. She was a nun, and the founder of the Missionaries of Charity. In 1952 she opened a home for the dying and destitute in Calcutta, India. For over 45 years she ministered to the poor, sick, orphaned, and dying. Her work eventually extended to five continents, 610 missions, in 123 countries at the time of her death.<sup>5</sup> Extending hospitality and kindness to those in need, an ordinary thing to do but Mother Teresa did it with extraordinary vision and effectiveness.

Monica was another woman in history known for effectiveness. Born in the year 332 in North Africa to a family of nobility but little wealth, Monica showed an early "desire for eternal things" and was often given to prayer or found at church. She had an intense concern for the poor, sometimes saving food from her own plate to share with those in need. At age 22 she was married to a man twice her age, more her parents' idea than her own. She was a Christian and he was not. She was pious and he was not. Her biographer says that her marriage condemned her to a life-long martyrdom. Soon after her marriage, her mother-in-law came to live with them. Even though

<sup>3</sup> [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet\\_tubman#family\\_and\\_marriage](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/harriet_tubman#family_and_marriage)

<sup>4</sup> [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie\\_Curie](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_Curie)

<sup>5</sup> [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother\\_Teresa](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mother_Teresa)

her husband was annoyed with her praying and her charities, she quietly continued these expressions of her devotion.

Her devotion to her children was equally impressive. She had three: two boys and a girl. She prayed that God would help her as a parent to raise them well. At the birth of her first child, she dedicated him to the Lord in a religious ceremony that involved the sign of the cross upon his forehead but baptism was postponed until a later time. She molded her son's mind and spirit from his earliest days but he revolted against his studies and refused to apply himself. He lied and deceived his parents, stole from them, cheated at games. It was as if he embodied the conflict between the characters of his two parents.

Monica continued to pray for him. He went off to school and was exceedingly bright but it didn't affect the way he lived. He became involved with a woman who soon became pregnant and a son was born to them, though unmarried. Monica was heartbroken. She wept and even today there is a feast day in honor of her on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May in the Roman Catholic Church – the feast of tears of a Christian mother. Monica's son, who was to become one of the greatest intellects of Christian faith – St. Augustine – finally came around. Augustine was always quick to say that it was his mother who led him to Christian life. “Yes, Lord. If I am your servant, it is because I am the son of your handmaiden.” And “to my mother, to her prayers and merits, I owe all that I am.” And “if I love truth above all else, and for its sake would lay down my life, for this I am indebted to my mother, whose prayers God could not withstand.”<sup>6</sup>

On Easter Sunday 387, Augustine was baptized. That same year his mother died. Twice through great labor she had given birth to her son, once into the world and once again into the reign of the Lord. St. Augustine later wrote these rather well known words, “You have made us for yourself O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” These were no empty words for him but born of the restlessness which marked his early life. Augustine knew from personal experience what restlessness was all about.

Lydia came to know the power of the Gospel in her life. And so have countless people throughout history, women and men who became extraordinary themselves because they allowed a change to begin with them. Is your heart restless today? Perhaps now is the perfect time to let it rest in the One for whom you were made; the Lord

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<sup>6</sup> From *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Written in 397 A.D.

who gives life, who created time, and who gives new life to those who have lost their way. The good news of the Gospel was moving out into the world, changing the lives of women and entire households as a new kind of motivation for hospitality and care giving generated a new way of living. Maybe the new way of living we are looking for is really built on an old foundation, faith in Christ and the transformation that comes with it. Amen.

*Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible, copyright 1946, 1952, 1971 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*