

Aunt Rita, The Bag Lady???

I want to share with you a story about my Aunt Rita who was my mother's aunt, so therefore, my great aunt.

Aunt Rita was an interesting person. My mom always said that Aunt Rita had money, but you sure couldn't tell by looking at her or talking to her.

Aunt Rita bought her clothes at the thrift store, never had enough food in her house to last more than a couple of days, never spent any money on makeup or a hair dresser, lived like a pack rat and never threw anything away.

And from a kids perspective, she would give the most pathetic birthday and Christmas gifts ever.

It was the joke of the family that she would open up bank accounts with \$100 to get the free gift, wrap that gift up, and that would become your Christmas gift. Then, she would close the account, and open another account up somewhere, get the free gift, and wrap that one, and that would be your brother's gift. And this would go on until she had completed all of her Christmas "shopping". One year my brothers and I all got Bank of America pen sets.

As teenagers, we always thought the strangest gift she ever gave was a Camel Bell that she gave my brother Brian one year. My brother was born in Africa on the Air Force Base. So, since there are camels in Africa, my Aunt Rita thought a camel bell would make a nice gift.

Not knowing what else to do with it, the camel bell got wrapped up, and then it was re-gifted to someone else. But, unfortunately, it always ended up being re-gifted back to someone in our family.

Good 'ole Aunt Rita. If you saw her walking down the street, you would have thought she was a bag lady. She wasn't dirty, but she wasn't made up, her hair was flat & straight, she wore old clothes and walked everywhere she went.

Sometimes you would even see her talking to herself. She wasn't hallucinating, but I think when you live alone for most of your life, you just speak out loud to hear a voice.

So if you did see her walking down the street, you might think she was a bag lady. But if you took the time and get to know her, you would see she did have a great heart, but you would also realize that becoming a bag lady was one of her greatest fears.

Aunt Rita was afraid that she would run out of money before she died. She didn't think she had nearly enough to support her for the rest of her life.

This is actually a true syndrome called "Bag Lady Syndrome", which over 46% of women suffer from.

The women that suffer from this might have good salaries, money in their purses, decent savings, but are still afraid that they will eventually go broke, and be forgotten and destitute. That they themselves will become Bag Ladies.

Now this fear isn't just among those living paycheck to paycheck or the middle class. But even among women with annual salaries above \$100,000, 48 percent of them fear a life of destitution.

Maybe you have heard some of their names: Lily Tomlin, Gloria Steinem, Shirley MacLaine, Katie Couric. All of these ladies have admitted having some anxiety about becoming a bag lady.

Many women have fears about money. Granted, some of it stems from the generation they grew up in. My Aunt lived during the Great Depression. Most of us here were either not born or were just small children during the 1930's. But the need for saving money and a genuine fear of not having any, was definitely felt by many of our parents.

For the rest of us, our parents were born right around World War II or years afterwards and we might not have the same fears about money as the generation before us.

But for so many women getting into their 60's, 70's, 80's, and even 90's, the fear of running out of money increases.

And men, we typically look at money differently than women. Many women look at money as security. Women are twice as likely as men to have a secret stash of money for those hard times. Psychologists tell us women typically like the sense of security money brings while men more likely crave the power or status that comes with having money.

Our reading today was about a successful woman named Lydia. If we look a little deeper into the story, we can see that Lydia is financially secure, a respected resident and a business owner. The Scripture says that she is a dealer in purple cloth.

Now at first glance, it sounds like she has a job in the fabrics section in Wal-mart. You know the place back in the corner with all of the threads, beads, bolts of fabric. Not typically considered the most glamorous of jobs.

But at closer look, we realize that Lydia's job is so much more. During the time this scripture was written, clothing was extremely important. And purple clothing! Purple clothing was the sign of wealth and royalty in the Roman World.

So if you wore purple, you were pretty much showing your wealth, importance, and power.

So Lydia had a very close connection to the rich and famous. She, in essence, was the "Gucci" of her time. There was probably little chance she would wind up broke, forgotten, or destitute.

Now the Scripture doesn't tell us that Lydia has "Bag Lady" nightmares. Nowhere does it tell us the fears she has in her life.

But it does tell us how she responds to hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul shared with her. The Scripture shows us that she is motivated by faith, not by fear.

If Lydia was suffering from the "Bag Lady Syndrome," we would have found out right there.

Lydia had a ton of reasons to exercise restraint when she heard the words these two strangers were speaking. First of all, why trust strangers at all – they might want something from you – wouldn't it be better to keep to ourselves?

If Lydia had a fear of becoming a Bag Lady, it might have made her clutch all of her possessions and run home to protect her secret stash of money.

But she doesn't take any of those fear based actions. Instead, she responds with faith, generosity and hospitality.

She asks for Paul to baptize her and her family. Then she insists to Paul that, in her words, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." So Paul and another man named Silas did stay.

In time, Lydia's house became a center of Christian worship in Philippi and it becomes a church with a very close relationship to the Apostle Paul.

Later, in Paul's letter to the Philippians, which are Lydia's people, he talks about how in the early days, (shortly after meeting Lydia) when he was just starting out spreading the Good News of Jesus, that no church shared with him in the matter of giving and receiving, except for them.

So no church shared and supported Paul in the early days – except the one that was started by Lydia, a woman who chose faith over fear. The people of this church became known as the generous ones, the hospitable ones, the faithful ones.

Now, because it is Mother's Day, it would be easy for me to just address this message to the women of this church, but fear doesn't discriminate based on gender.

Sure, most men don't fear becoming a "Bag Lady" – at least I hope not. But can't each of us have our own frightening vision of being wiped out and broke, robbed of stability and security, and condemned to a life on the streets?

Or, if it isn't financial fear, maybe it is another type of fear that gives us sleepless nights. Fear of catastrophes, or failures, fear of dependency, fear of inadequacy. Our fears can be overwhelming. They can cause us to turn inside to ourselves, live alone, not trust others, and avoid any changes around us. Hoarding all of our possessions in fear and not let anyone close to us, and always needing more and more and more saved up.

The antidote for our fear is not a tighter grip on our possessions or on our lifestyle, it is not to play it safe and distrust everyone. These things only separate us from the Good News that God is putting before us.

The antidote to our fear is just the opposite. The way to awaken ourselves from the Bag Lady Nightmare is to choose faith over fear. Sure, common sense needs to come into play, but the way to find real peace and security is to practice generosity and hospitality.

Generosity and Hospitality can come in so many different forms.

We can open our homes to international students. We can open our wallets to help support a youth going to camp. We can open our car doors to programs that deliver food to homeless families.

We can open our hearts and support programs that reach out to those in our community and beyond. We can take the time to support each other, and trust that the other person isn't trying to use and abuse us. We can try to love each other – despite all of the shortcomings we all have.

Living in an attitude of generosity and hospitality can free us from our fears.

Fear can make us come up with a million different reasons why we shouldn't do something. But with faith, there tends to be one reason that just sticks with us - as to why we should do something.

So Lydia was put in that place to start a church that supported the Apostle Paul in his ministry. We should ask ourselves, what is it that God has put us here to do?

Where is God at work in our lives, right here, right now?

What is the one thing that we should be doing as a disciple of Jesus Christ, as we put our faith into action?

My Aunt Rita died about 7 years ago at the age of 90. When she died, she was scraping by on an income of less than \$20,000 per year. As the Executor of her estate, it was my job to liquidate any assets she had and distribute those to the family. Although she only lived off of \$20,000 a year, Aunt Rita's estate was worth more than \$3,200,000.

One might say her estate was so large, because she **lived** like a bag lady. Another might say that her estate was so large because of her **fear** of becoming a bag lady. I ask you this, what is the difference?

Each of us is being given an opportunity to trade a nightmare for a dream. If we follow the example of Lydia and so many others who have taken that first step of faith, we will find ourselves moving from anxiety to serenity, from a life ruled by fear to a life shaped by faith.

The path is different for each of us. Some of us will find that we are called to open our homes, others our wallets, others our cars, others our appointment calendars.

No matter what special thing God is calling us to do, he is asking us to all open our hearts to each other.

Living in faith allows us to put the fear behind us, faith lets those nightmares of becoming a bag lady end and those dreams of discipleship begin.

Thanks be to God.

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