

Acts 9:36-43

Love Enacted

I think it is lovely that on this Mother's Day the scripture reading would be about a woman. In this case a generous and kind woman named Tabitha, if you were to use her Aramaic name, and Dorcas in Greek. It is nothing new for people to have two names depending on where they are. My own mom's name was Antje in Dutch. She was born in the Netherlands and so her given name is Dutch. When she immigrated to Canada, she took the name Ann. My dad is Johannes in Dutch and Anglicized to John. What it does signify is a crossing of borders. These borders were physical borders but also crossed cultures and also means that their lives crossed over the paths of many different people in many places. This also happened because they moved a number of times over their lifetimes as well.

I suspect that may have been the case for Tabitha. Being known by two names, she likely had a foot in different communities of people. I suspect she may have had some very intimate knowledge of and experiences with the people. As a seamstress she would have been up close and personal. You can't be shy to touch others if you are going to fit them for clothing. I think of the times I have gone to have clothes altered. You have to be okay with being vulnerable as it is often around areas that we are self-conscious about, or think of as more private, that seem to be where adjustments need to be made, or at least have to be dealt with in order to get things sized properly.

In any case, Tabitha has made an impression on the widows in her community. I found it so wonderful to get so many details about Tabitha. It is not often in scripture we get a story about a woman, much less a story that shares so much information. Listen to these details.

First off, she was a disciple. That alone is significant. For all those who think that only men were leaders and disciples, this story tells us that women had a place, a role in leadership. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. Think about that. This is the way she is described...*devoted* to good works and *devoted* to acts of charity. This wasn't a past time, it was how she was in the world, in community, as a person. Then, just as she had been intimately close to those women whose bodies she clothed, after Tabitha became ill and died, they washed her and they laid her in a room. The Jewish traditions around death are highly respectful of both the one who has died and those who mourn. How Tabitha's body was given respect reflects those traditions.

Yet for some reason things were not left there. Two men were sent to get Peter in Joppa which was near to Lydda where Tabitha's body lay. It doesn't say why he is summoned, but given the story that comes just before this of Peter healing Aeneas, a

man who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed, and the stories of Peter that may have been going around the country side from even before that, who knows what hope the people were holding out for. At any rate, Peter comes to them and is led up to the room where the widows are holding vigil. We are told that all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing, that Dorcas/Tabitha had made. It also says, clothing she had made while she was with them. Not just while she was alive or doing or trade, but while she was with them.

Peter then does something that is also personal. Where, as much of his ministry has had witnesses, this time he asks everyone to leave and in private he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body that has been laying there and was prepared for burial and said, "Tabitha, get up." He uses her given name. Another personal touch and in response to his prayer and spoken word she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

Once sitting up, Peter gave her his hand and helped her up further. Picture this scene. Peter gave her his hand and helped her up. I love that detail. I love all the details of this story including the part where he then called to those gathered and showed her to be alive.

There are a couple of things that are of note in this story. First off is the intimacy of the whole story. This was not some big show of strength, power, or display. This is a story of quiet, humble, and private caring of body, mind, and spirit. It is a story of community, of individuals, quietly going about their day in ways that impact the lives of others with love, grace, care, and compassion. Dorcas cared for others and in return they deeply care for her. It is all deeply personal and yet it gets to the heart of true power and strength.

The church's strength is in its care for those who are in need. Over and over again the gospels tell stories about Jesus' care for those who were most vulnerable. Jesus spoke about the blessing of those who were poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst, the peacemakers. He also made sure that crowds of people who had come to hear him had been fed. He healed people who were looking to be made whole. We have stories of a woman who had her menstrual period for years without end and just touching the hem of Jesus' cloak healed her. We have a woman from another country who begs Jesus to heal her sick child and he does so even though he is not physically present with the child. Jesus healed a paralyzed man who had been sitting beside what was known to be a healing pool but he could never get in.

Jesus showed care, Peter showed gentle care, and Tabitha herself was a woman who intimately cared for the needs of those who most often did not have much, the widows in the community who, in their time in history, had no standing in society.

And now we are here, Christian community, Christian people, called to care for others. To respond to their needs, restore them to wholeness and then rejoice with them. We are the church. This is the church. The church looks for ways to be a place where

people can find the intimate care, compassion, grace, and love that we are called to extend to others. We do not need to do it in ways that are flamboyant or attention getting. As individuals we do not need to do it in big ways, though at times we may also be asked to do that.

But in what ways can we be people who show care and compassion. In the church we have done it by opening our doors to other congregations, we have some allowance for giving out money to those who need, “bus fare” to be used for whatever is their need that day, bus fare, a cup of coffee. It is not much but I know it is appreciated. We also have a small amount that I can use to help people buy some groceries or medications and we have the prayer shawl ministry that brings comfort. Lately we have raised funds for Shelter House, Life-water, the Underground Gym and Grace Place.

This is important work, however it does not replace the call for us to be intimately involved with those in need, to find ways that our lives might intersect with their lives in personal ways. This is done when we talk to those who are not recognized either because they are without a home, or we fear the differences in cultural practices. We are called to be with those who are grieving as well as those whose choices have landed them in precarious places. We can care for the sick, the impoverished, the lonely, with compassion, grace, and most of all love. It is amazing what love can do. It is not that our compassion, grace, and love will change everything. The women Tabitha made clothing for continued to be widowed and in need, but the care given made a difference. It was important. It made them feel seen and valuable. Someone cared enough to do a tangible act of kindness.

It may be getting groceries, giving a ride, doing taxes, giving a haircut, sitting by a bedside or giving a hug. It doesn’t have to take a lot of words, in fact often action is preferable. It is not about giving advice; it is about being present. It is about meeting people where they are at physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

One last note, I don’t want us to miss the fact that Tabitha was raised from the dead. She would have died eventually, but in this moment the power of resurrection was present through Peter. Resurrection comes in many forms for us in our lives. There is resurrection power. We may not be bringing people back to life, but we have the power to help others, through Christ, be restored to wholeness which can be a little like being resurrected. And going back to the story, the way in which Peter quietly prayed, gave his hand to Tabitha to help her up is a beautiful way to look at how we can be there for others, in prayer, lending a hand and helping others and each other up.

It is also a beautiful way to think about our own rising up to God in our death. A gentle pray and hand given as we die and meet God whose love will restore us to fullness in our dying.

May you this day and in the days to come find ways to show gentle strength and support to those who need to know someone cares. To be *devoted* to good works and *devoted* to acts of charity in ways that demonstrates God’s love. Make it more than a

past time or volunteer opportunity. May we strive to be this way in the world, in community, as the church, and as a person. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.