

WORSHIP

Sermon | 5.13.2018



Casseroles and Prayer Shawls

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Acts 9:36-43

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, 'Please come to us without delay.' So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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We are continuing our sermon series in the book of Acts. Following the steps of the earliest disciples of Jesus to learn what it looks like to live as if Easter was real and Jesus was Lord – even in the midst of a world that doesn't always behave like that is true.

Today our passage is from the end the ninth chapter. This is a story about the Apostle Peter who comes into contact with a disciple named Tabitha. Listen with me for the word of the Lord....

Happy Mother's Day.

Mother's Day is an interesting thing to celebrate in church.

It's not a church holiday.

Once – in my younger and naïve years – I tried to go through the second Sunday of May without making reference to Mother's Day in order to make a liturgical point. It wasn't a very



good point. I learned something from that experience.

Note to self – don't you mess with Mother's Day.

Sometimes, on Mother's Day, I see people who don't come to church a whole lot, but they know it makes their momma's happy to sit beside her in the pew and so they show up.

Sometimes, Mother's Day is hard – because there are people in church who miss their mothers...and sometimes it's hard because there are other people in church whose relationships with their mothers are complicated.

For others of us, Mother's Day presents a different kind of challenge. I feel it every early May when I think about what I should give the mothers in my life: my own mother, the mother of my children, my mother-in-law.

How do you express gratitude for the gift of maternal love through stuff that we buy?

Cards, flowers, jewelry...it all seems kind of silly in comparison.

This feeling is one that the poet Billy Collins captures well in a poem called "The Lanyard." He writes about an experience he had making arts and crafts for his mother while at camp as a boy. Indulge me as I read:

*...I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.*

*She gave me life [feeding me from her very self],
and I gave her a lanyard.*

*She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the air light*

*and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.*

*Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.*



*Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift - not the worn truth*

*that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-toned lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.*

This morning we meet a woman named Tabitha. That was her Jewish name. She was also called Dorcas – that was her Greek, or Gentile name...which is interesting, because in the early church when Tabitha lived, there was a huge conflict between the Jews and Gentiles... but it sounds like both – the Jews and the Gentiles – knew her; and respected her.

We don't know if Tabitha was a mother. It seems as if she was maternal...in the best sense of that word but we don't know if she had children of her own. What we know is that Tabitha was a disciple of Jesus. In fact, there is one place in the New Testament where the word disciple is written in the feminine form...it is here, to describe Tabitha.

Even though this is a short story – an episode, really, a stop along a longer journey for Peter – even though all we get are snippets, it's clear to me that the people in Joppa are at a loss for how to respond to the news of Tabitha's death.

They were at a loss because she meant something to them – and to their community.

She had an impact – on the widows who were gathered in the room where her body lay, weeping, and showing one another the tunics and prayer shawls that Tabitha had made for them.

She had an impact on the men of the city – who were doing what men typically do in emotional situations...trying to **do** something, **fix** something...and they heard that Peter – the #1 Apostle – was nearby in Lydda and maybe they could find him and he could make it better.

The Scripture tells us that Tabitha was **devoted** to good works and acts of charity.

And I can imagine that the members that community – of that early church in the seaport on the Mediterranean called Joppa, felt almost **inadequate** to do anything that might even come



close to honoring the work and the ministry that Tabitha had shared with them.

“Come to us without delay,” the men said to Peter.

She gave us *everything*...and what did we give her?

If Tabitha were a member of our church, I feel confident that she would have been a recipient of the Presbyterian Women’s Lifetime Membership award.

Each year – for us it was last Thursday – a committee of the Presbyterian Women select two people whose commitment to ministry and the church over the course of years are worthy of being celebrated and honored.

I have this sense of who Tabitha might have been because I have known many women who have received PW Lifetime Memberships – and they are...amazing...impactful...ambassadors of Christ.

The first time my mom became a mother, Danny Verner was soon at her door.

Danny was a leader in Presbyterian Women at Myers Park Presbyterian Church where my mom was an associate pastor. Danny (and many others) showed up with enough chicken casseroles to feed an army. They brought hand-knit blankets, booties, and caps. Cross-stitched pillows and wall hangings with nursery rhymes and Bible verses. They brought diapers and wipes and lotion. They represented a community of care.

Later, Danny Verner would be the one to send my mother hand-written notes of encouragement and support. Danny was one of those who took my mother to lunch when mom was trying to figure out how to balance being a trailblazer for women in pastoral ministry while trying to raise two rambunctious kids.

Danny was active on the Session – one of the church’s first female Elders. She was a backbone of the church’s outreach efforts – consistently volunteering to help carry the light of Christ to those were too easily forgotten: those on the margins, the widows, children.

I remember what my mom *sounded* like when she told my sister and me that Danny had died after a long, faithful life. There was gratitude – but more, there was a deep desire to communicate to us what Danny and her ministry had meant.

She gave me everything...and what did I give her?

I have a sense of who Tabitha was – and what she meant – because I’ve known women like her in the church...women like Danny Verner. And I’m not going to be specific and embarrass them, but you know you can look around this room and see other Tabithas. They are the women – the disciples of Jesus – whose presence and ministry help make the church feel like church – like a place where you feel safe, loved, special, and valued.



So what was it about Tabitha? What quality did she express...what spiritual gift did she possess that God used to help her make an impact?

I think it was kindness. I think Tabitha was kind.

She may have been other things, too.

I want to be a little careful on this Mother's Day with this story about a beloved woman in the early church to not overplay the gender stereotype. For all we know Tabitha might have been on the Joppa City Council. She may have been a fierce advocate for workers' rights in the city. She could have been a successful merchant – a shrewd businesswoman.

There are a lot of things we don't know about Tabitha – but it seems obvious to me that she was kind.

That's why there were widows beside her lifeless body.

That's why the men of the church were walking the streets, searching out Peter. It's why she had a reputation for good works and charity.

It's why both Jews and Gentiles knew her name.

She was a disciple of Jesus – and she was kind.

But even more specifically and importantly, she was kind during a time when there was conflict...and division...and uncertainty...and suspicion.

And we know, don't we, that practicing kindness toward all people can be difficult in that kind of environment.

Not just being kind to the people in your family – that can hard enough.

But practicing kindness to people outside of your tribe.

Practicing kindness toward people whose paths do not cross your own without some effort on your part.

Practicing kindness toward those who may not have been kind to you.

I think this was Tabitha's spiritual gift.

And I think that kindness is about much more than being polite and acting like your momma would want you to act.

I think that kindness is a key ingredient in what it means to live like Jesus is Lord...to live in ways that reveal resurrection.

Because how we treat one another reflects something about the God we believe in and trust.

How we treat one another provides a window into our hearts.



How we treat one another is a measure of just how much we really believe that Jesus Christ came into our world to save and reconcile and redeem all of those who are created in God's image.

Kindness is the currency of resurrection faith.

And, oh my, doesn't our world need that right now?

What a testimony kindness can be in the face of so many ways that we are unkind to one another.

Eventually, Peter shows up.

He is escorted into the room where Tabitha's body lay.

I would imagine it was pretty obvious to Peter how important Tabitha was to that community – the crowd was pushing in. It almost seems as if Peter needed people to clear out of the room so he could have some space to think.

Peter prayed – we don't what Peter prayed – but I can imagine in those quiet moments beside Tabitha's bed with the crowds outside the door – Peter got the sense that this woman had been practicing resurrection.

That she had been living toward the vision of God's promised day.

So then Peter invited her to continue in that work – "Tabitha, get up," Peter said.

And she did.

And what happened in that room became known throughout Joppa.

And many people believed in the Lord.

Perhaps because of what Peter did.

Or, perhaps, because of who Tabitha was – and how the resurrected one showed up in her life.

