

“Bible Heroes: Tabitha”
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Overbrook Presbyterian Church
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Scripture Reading: Acts 9:36-42

³⁶Now 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. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since 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.” ³⁹So 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. ⁴⁰Peter 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. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.



Sermon: *“Bible Heroes: Tabitha”*

Our scripture reading this morning is a somewhat obscure story about a disciple who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, used their God given abilities to form and shape the world more closely into God’s Kingdom.

Now of course, you’re probably thinking of Peter raising the dead. As far as Biblical heroics go, it’s hard to beat a good old-fashioned resurrection. Most of us remember Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead.¹ But, well before that incident in John’s gospel, Mark tells us about Jesus going to heal the sick daughter of a powerful Synagogue official named Jairus.² You might remember this story as the one where, while on his way to see this little girl, Jesus stops to heal the hemorrhaging woman. By the time he arrives at the home of Jairus, the people gathered there tell him “don’t bother,” because the little girl is already dead.

But Jesus goes in anyway, and clears the room except for the girl’s parents and three of his disciples that he had brought with him. Then, taking the little girl’s hand, he says to her “Talitha, cum” which means in Aramaic, “Little girl, get up,” and she does.

One of the three disciples that accompanied Jesus that day, was Peter.

Maybe that’s why our story today resembles that earlier account from Jesus’ ministry. Peter travels to the town of Joppa at the request of those who knew the deceased. Peter cleared the room like Jesus had done. And even his words evoke the image of Christ: “Tabitha, get up” sounds a little bit like “Talitha, cum.”

¹ John 11:1-45, NRSV

² Mark 5:21-43, NRSV

What Peter does in this story is evidence of the power of the Holy Spirit working through the disciples of Jesus Christ to form and shape the world more closely into God's Kingdom. As an example of God's action in the world, it is impressive. The story ends with the comment that when the news of this miracle spread throughout the land, "many believed in the Lord." Again, raising someone from the dead really gets people's attention. But Peter is not the hero I wanted to talk with you about today. It's Tabitha.

The author of Acts describes Tabitha as "a disciple" which means she is one who follows Christ's teachings. Now, we don't have much more information about Tabitha, but from what we do have, there's no reason to assume she was a particularly powerful person. There's no reason to think that Tabitha was a statesman or a job creator. She most likely wasn't a great financial benefactor of the community. There was no Tabitha Center for the Performing Arts; no Tabitha Medical Center down at the Joppa State University Hospital. But when Peter arrives, he is greeted by people who knew her and who are mourning her loss, many of them are widows.

Remember, women in this time had few rights and without the support of a man, whether husband, father, or brother, a woman's prospects were limited. That is why the situation for a widow in those days was so desperate. Jesus urges his disciples to give special attention to people like widows and orphans who are considered most vulnerable in society. And so, many of those mourning Tabitha's loss are widows, because she was one who heard Jesus' teaching and obeyed. Those widows hold up tunics and other garments as evidence to Peter of what Tabitha has meant to them in her life.

Now, you might not think that making clothes is that big of a deal; that it doesn't warrant a whole Sunday sermon dedicated to telling that story. But consider what her gifts meant to those who received them.

As an adult, there are lots of things you must do every day and a whole bunch of things to keep an eye on. The kids these days call that "adulting" and as most of you know, "adulting" is hard. Taking care of children, arranging meals, caring for a home, working to pay the bills, all of that takes time and considerable energy. For widows of that time, working might well have meant gleaning in someone else's fields or begging, both very time-consuming tasks. If there were children, she would have to care for them. If there was a home, which was not a given, she would have to clean and repair it. Since there was no running water, going to a village well or a stream to fetch water would be necessary. There could possibly be elderly family members for whom she was responsible. She would need to arrange meals for herself and her family, and clothes for them to wear which would need to be purchased or, as is more likely the case, hand-made. Adulting is and always has been, hard, and it's even harder when you're trying to do it alone.

What Tabitha provided to these women may not seem like a lot, but she removed one of those worries from their lives. Clothing and warm garments for cold nights, were not a concern for the widows of Joppa, because Tabitha was good with a needle and thread, and she was a disciple.

When thinking about Tabitha, these words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew come to mind:

"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw You hungry and gave You food, or thirsty and gave You something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw

You a stranger and welcomed You, or naked and gave You clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw You sick or in prison and visited You?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of My family, you did it to Me.’”³

I imagine that Tabitha was influenced by those words, especially the part about clothing the naked.

She wasn’t a great public speaker like Paul. She couldn’t teach the things Jesus taught with the authority of James and John who had travelled with Jesus and had sat listening at his feet hundreds of times. She didn’t have the ability to channel the power of the Holy Spirit to cure the sick and raise the dead, like Peter did. But her hands were nimble and she knew how to use a needle. And that is what makes her a hero. She used the gifts God gave her to serve the people God sent to her.

Today, our time together in this space will be a little shorter than usual so that we can spend some of our worship time in service to God. None of the projects we’re engaging this morning take a particular set of skills. None are too challenging. We should all be able to make lunch or to write notes of encouragement.

But each is a small way in which we can use our gifts and abilities to serve God. And each should help us remember that we don’t have to have the greatest intellect, or the deepest bank account, or the broadest influence to serve; we don’t have to have the most impressive skills or endless amounts of free time or the creativity of Martha Stewart to serve.

God has given us each gifts and abilities. It is our task to be open to using those gifts and abilities for God’s purposes when those opportunities present themselves. All that takes is a willing heart and the courage to act.

And in the end, we don’t have to change the world, we just need to try to make a difference in it. Because if you’ll just do your best, and I do my best, and we all do our best, God will take our best and make something amazing come from it.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

³ Matthew 25:31-46, NRSV