

Acts of Charity

The story of a disciple named Tabitha

Acts 9:36-43

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Last Sunday afternoon, a group of just over 60 folks, including many of you, gathered here at the church for an event sponsored by the Progressive Religious Coalition of Tulsa. The topic of our discussion was, "Is the Bible 'True'?" Taking a decidedly progressive approach, we explored how many biblical scholars today insist that we must stop equating the term 'truth' with 'fact.' In other words, **while the biblical narrative contains many stories that most likely are not factual, historical events, they nonetheless have the capacity to point to and reveal truth. Therefore, no story should be dismissed.**

After hearing today's New Testament reading from Acts 9, it's only natural to start with a fairly obvious question: Do you believe it's possible for a person who has a strong faith in God and Jesus, working through the power of the Holy Spirit, to literally bring a person who has been physically dead for some time back to life? Medical science would say something like, 'of course not, that's the makings of fantasy literature.'

Yet right here in the Bible, in the Book of Acts, written by the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke, we have the remarkable story of Peter who "knelt down and prayed and turned to the body [of a dead disciple] and said, 'Tabitha, get up.' She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up."

Now, did that really happen? Is this account factual? If the answer is yes, then why do you suppose bringing dead people back to life isn't something that other Christians are able to do today? A traditional answer to that question is that God just doesn't do that kind of thing anymore. God did miraculous things like this in Jesus' day, and before, but not now.

Progressive Christians would have a different answer. Perhaps this story of the resuscitation of the deceased Tabitha wasn't an historical event at all. Perhaps the author, Luke, never intended for people to interpret this story literally. If that is the case, then we need to ask: Why did Luke tell this story (which may be somewhat rooted in some kind of an historical event) the way he did? Most modern biblical scholars believe that Luke had three simple purposes for this story: one dealing with Peter, another with the disciple named Tabitha, and the other focusing on the role of the faith community.

Concerning Peter, the story of his bring-back-to-life miracle is meant to be reminiscent of Jesus' own activity. It is meant to show that the power that Jesus displayed is actually still at work through Peter. The point is that there is continuity between Jesus and his disciples. This is Luke's way of emphasizing that Jesus' ministry did not end when he died; instead, it continues through the ministries of Peter and others. **Peter continues the work that Jesus began. That is what disciples do - continue the work and ministry of their Teacher. That is what we are called to do as disciples, to continue the work and ministry begun by Jesus.**

But Luke intends for our minds to go back even further to recall similar episodes in the Old Testament. The story in Acts also echoes our Old Testament reading from 1 Kings, Elijah's raising from the dead the son of a widow. There happens to be another similar story in 2 Kings where Elisha raises from the dead a Shunammite woman's son. The New Testament author wants us to see Peter standing in the same tradition as the Old Testament prophets, a position of great authority and responsibility. In the telling of this story, Luke reveals that the end result is that many people, both Jews and Gentiles alike, converted to Christianity.

So how can we apply this part of today's text to us today? To enter into the world described in Acts, we do not need to leave our minds at the door, but it is necessary for us to accept the assumption that **God is still working today through God's Spirit in the lives of people and in human society to restore and bring wholeness to this broken world.** In the long run, I think this simple interpretation has a lot more meaning and relevance than whether or not we believe that Peter literally brought someone back to life.

The second, and perhaps more prominent aspect and purpose of this story focuses on a woman named **Tabitha**. Tabitha is an Aramaic name. We're told that her name in Greek is Dorcas. Both names mean "gazelle." Luke gives us a very brief, though fairly good idea of the kind of woman she was. She lived in the seaport city of Joppa, located on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea thirty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. Tabitha is an important person in the Christian community at Joppa. Her death affects the community so much that they send two people to bring Peter, who was about 10 miles away at the time in the city of Lydda, to her bedside.

Tabitha is identified in the biblical text as a "disciple." Herein lies a very important and often overlooked part of the story. **She is the only woman explicitly identified as a "disciple" in the Book of Acts, and this is the only occurrence of the feminine form of the noun "disciple" anywhere in the New Testament.** Luke, therefore, wants us to pay careful attention to what he is about to reveal about her.

We are told that Tabitha was a very important part of the Joppa community because, in part, of her **"good works and acts of charity."** Verse 39 provides a specific example of her "good works": she has made clothes for the widows of Joppa. *The Women's Bible Commentary* has the following to say about Tabitha:

When Luke's description of Tabitha is read carefully, it becomes clear that she is valued as a philanthropist, a woman, seemingly a widow herself, who takes care of the needy widows in Joppa out of her own resources. She spends her own money to care for the widows, not the church's money. It is no wonder that the widows weep when she dies and are among the first to be shown that their benefactress has been restored to life.

Tabitha is the proper society matron, doing works of charity and sewing clothes for the less fortunate. Tabitha's service to the community of women at Joppa is indeed to be valued as a model of discipleship. Tabitha was a Christian woman whose life was devoted to the service of others and whose death left an enormous gap. **When folks like her die there is always a chance that the good works they did will cease. Their**

death really makes a difference, because their life made such a difference.

From this we learn that **discipleship is about making a difference.** Your life and mine should make a difference! Our ministry as individuals and as a congregation should make a difference in our community. And the example that we are given in this little-known biblical story is that **our ministry should be filled with doing "good works and acts of charity," and not because we mistakenly think it earns us God's favor, but as a response to our calling as followers of Jesus.**

We all know individuals like Tabitha, don't we? – people who exhibit a deep and abiding commitment to give expression to God's compassion for those in need; those who are tenacious about practicing their faith by serving others. **Tabitha's work is too important to die.** People like Tabitha are alive in every church I know, and most certainly in this one. This congregation has been involved in many and various ministries of compassion and justice over the decades. College Hill is known within this presbytery, and in this city, for involving itself in this kind of ministry.

We cannot rest on our good works and acts of charity of the past, however. I would like to invite and encourage you, therefore, to find a project or two in which to get involved. Doing good works and acts of charity always involve our time and our talents. They also often involve our financial resources. Last year, we increased our church benevolence giving by 5 percent. In our Proposed 2012 Budget, which you will be receiving in a couple of weeks, we are hoping that with your generous pledges we can increase our Outreach & Mission giving by another 5 percent. **A church that intentionally focuses its mission and ministry on those in need is a church fulfilling its calling!**

Finally, and in conjunction with all this, let's look at the role that the **community of faith** played in this story of Peter bringing life back to Tabitha. The congregation in Joppa was making communal intercession for the healing of one of its members, hoping earnestly for her wholeness by reaching out to her with the spiritual resources at hand. **Christians today are more aware than ever of the power of holistic healing – the intersection of prayer, hopeful attitude, and the resources of medicine.** We are more aware than ever that no one should face disease alone. **Prayers on behalf of the faith community are powerful healing partners.** This was true for Tabitha, and it remains true for us today. **The helpful distinction is between praying for a cure, which seems to dictate to God our desired outcome, and praying for healing, which can come in a hundred unexpected ways.**

Unfortunately, however, there is a tendency within all of us, when facing a crisis, tragedy, or even an illness to pull away, to draw in, to hunker down, to go private. But like those who rallied around Tabitha, we must find ways to identify, energize, and celebrate the marks of a healing community in today's individualistic culture. **For the emphasis of this biblical story is not upon a return from death, but upon a community honing all of its spiritual strength and resources passionately upon life and wholeness.**

Amen.

Resource:

Feasting on the Word, "Homiletical Perspective" on this passage by Stephen D. Jones.