

“Two Healing Stories”
Acts 9.32-43
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Last Sunday we began our study of Acts chapter 9 with the story of Saul’s dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. We had a flash of a heavenly light (9.3) knocking Saul to the ground, then the Lord’s voice saying “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” The once proud persecutor of the church is blinded by the light and so humbled that he has to be led by others to Damascus. And like the movie Inception where you have one dream or vision inside of another, Saul is led to a man named Ananias who lays his hand on Saul so that he might regain his sight, be healed and then baptized. Saul who has now become Paul is commissioned to be God’s instrument to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. In the coming chapters we will follow Paul’s adventures, but we already know that things will not be easy. Just a few verses after his conversion story Paul faces resistance and persecution in Damascus, but he manages to escape when his disciples lower him in a basket down through a hole in the city wall (9.23-25). Because of the resistance he faced in Jerusalem, Paul is shipped off to his home in Tarsus.

Today we pick up the story of Acts in verse 32 of chapter 9. With Paul temporarily gone the spotlight returns to Peter, the lead apostle of the 12. We read of two healing stories, one in the city of Lydda and the other in close-by Joppa. Let us listen now for God’s word...

Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!” And immediately he got up. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

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.

The Word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

If you have been paying attention, the Acts of the Apostles has been a rather fast-paced story of the church’s birth - beginning in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, and then spreading out to Judea

and Samaria, and as we will soon see, even to the ends of the earth where the non-Jewish Gentiles live. And though we have seen that the Spirit sometimes gets ahead of the church, crossing boundaries and sending unlikely messengers like Philip to meet unlikely people like the Ethiopian eunuch on a wilderness road, the main characters are the Apostles. Peter and the eleven who run headquarters back in Jerusalem - Stephen and Philip who are among the 7 appointed to take care of the Greek widows (6.5) - and then it's Saul, the chief persecutor turned prophet - these characters all make up the Acts of the Apostles. These characters are the drivers of the fast-paced narrative before us. And today appears to be no exception. When Peter goes down to the saints living in Lydda, he discovers a man named Aeneas who is paralyzed, bedridden for 8 years. In the very next verse Peter simply says, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" And you guessed it - immediately the healing happens and the residents of Lydda and the surrounding area turn to the Lord (9.35). This fast paced scene mirrors Jesus' ministry when a paralytic is lowered down by his friends from the rooftop to be healed in Luke 5 (17-26). Peter's words echo Jesus who told the paralyzed man, "Stand up and take your bed and go to your home!" (5.24). Throughout the book of Acts we see Jesus' ministry being extended by the early church leaders - what Jesus once did, the apostles can now do through the power of the Holy Spirit. Notice how Peter makes it clear he does not heal the man by his own power - instead he proclaims the good news, "Jesus Christ heals you!"

And so when we come to the next story of the disciple named Tabitha in the nearby city of Joppa, we should expect more fast paced action, with the head apostle Peter leading the way. But as Acts scholar Matthew Skinner has noted, something unexpected happens - things begin to slow down ([Matthew Skinner, Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel](#), pp. 74-79) While we learned nothing about Aeneas except that he was paralyzed for 8 years, we learn much more about the disciple named Tabitha. First of all, we discover she has two names - Tabitha is her Arabic name, but to Greek speaking folks she also is known as Dorcas. This fact gives us a clue that she might be bi-lingual or multi-cultural. We also hear something about her character, that she "was devoted to good works and acts of charity" (9.36). We will hear more about her good works in a few verses, but I think we should take our cues from the passage and simply slow down. As readers and students of Luke's often fast-paced Acts of the Apostles, we need not rush through the story as just another example of how great Peter is, or how great the apostles are in extending the ministry of Jesus. ***No, the invitation I want to offer you this morning is the invitation to slow down together as we look at this remarkable woman.*** What if the good news is not in the Acts of Peter the Apostle but rather in this woman who has made such a great impact on her community? Impact especially to the ones living on the margins, the widows.

When we learn of Tabitha's illness and death, we are told the community is doing what is required to prepare her for burial - she is washed and placed in a room by herself. When the church members in Joppa hear that Peter is close by in Lydda, they are compelled to go to Peter, "Please come to us without delay" (9.38) they say. If we pay close attention to the text, like we are supposed to do as good students, we don't know exactly why Tabitha's community is reaching out to Peter. She is clearly dead, not just sick or weak - we know this because she is being prepared for burial. Perhaps in their grief Tabitha's friends want to find support and comfort from Peter the head apostle - perhaps they want to share with him how great of a disciple they have lost in Tabitha. Perhaps... but it is also possible they seek Peter because they want her brought back to life - they want Peter to resurrect her not by his own power but through the power of God - the same power that rested on Jesus when he raised the little girl who had died back to life in Luke chapter 8 (vv. 49-56). In fact, that miracle of Jesus bears resemblance to what happens to Tabitha - even though in Luke's story the gathered

community all laugh at Jesus, knowing that the child was dead, we are told Jesus simply took her by the hand and called out, “Child, get up!” and she came to life (Luke 8.53-55).

Clearly Tabitha’s resurrection follows the same pattern. Like Jesus did, Peter puts everyone outside, kneels down to pray and simply says, “Tabitha, get up.” She opens her eyes, sees Peter, and sits up. And again, notice how the story slows down... we are told Peter tenderly gives her his hand and helps her up. He doesn't just rush off to perform the next miracle or the next mighty acts of the Apostles - no, he calls together the community of saints and the widows, and presents Tabitha as alive.

Now the good news spreads all over Joppa, and yes many believe in the Lord. Yes, Peter and the other men like Stephen and Philip and Saul can be used as instruments of the Lord, and many of the chapters left in Acts will detail these things. ***But this morning I want us to focus on this remarkable woman who has two names.*** Whether she's called Tabitha or Dorcas, it doesn't matter - what we do know is that when she is introduced by Luke in verse 36 as a disciple, he uses the feminine form of the word. Out of all of the women mentioned in the New Testament, and there are many, Tabitha is the only one clearly named as a woman disciple, and I believe this says something about her significance (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 177). I think Tabitha personifies the kingdom values Jesus taught, such as those who want to be called great in God's eyes must be a servant to all. What we know for sure is Tabitha's greatness had to do with her acts of service and love. Her death was felt by the whole community, especially the widows. Remember when Peter shows up, we are told that all the widows stood beside him, “weeping and showing him tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them” (9.39). Dorcas was not simply a benefactor who gave out funds to the needy - no, she was a servant who used her own hands to make the tunics the widows needed to survive. One commentator [[Working Preacher Sermon Brainwave](#) #290] on this passage points out how easily we take clothing for granted in our time - we see our clothes as temporary or even disposable items, things to drop off or pick up for cheap at Goodwill or other discount places. But back in the first century things were very different - it would take lots of time and energy to make the fabrics by hand, fabrics that might last people for years. Tabitha's impact was on the most vulnerable in a patriarchal society, widows who had no one to depend on for their livelihood. No wonder the community mourned when she was lost, as her presence made a huge difference in so many lives. And likewise, imagine the joy that came with her resurrection, her return to the community.

You see, though Peter and Paul and the other male apostles are often the main actors in the Acts narrative - useful instruments of God who witness to the Good News that the Holy Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh, we should not lose sight that the early church was also founded on saints like Tabitha. In fact, as Acts scholar Matthew Skinner has pointed out, the “high-profile figures, people like Peter and Paul tempt us to believe that discipleship “must be a high-wire act, always involving threat and deliverance, public recognition and miraculous deeds” (Skinner, p. 78). When was the last time you got struck by a bright light or had to escape persecution by being dropped down a wall in a basket?! But when things slow down, the spotlight turns on Tabitha! Skinner puts it like this: the “beauty about Tabitha” has to do with “how attainable her discipleship appears to us. Good works, charity, clothing the needy- hardly super deeds, and yet “deeds that can produce miraculous outcomes, generating “widespread love, support and appreciation. She is every bit as much a disciple and a witness as Peter. In her commitment to others, she leads her community. ***In her mercy, we see God***” (Skinner, p. 78).

Unfortunately, the sad history of the church over the centuries is that we have discounted the contributions of women like Tabitha. Even though the heart of the Pentecost message of Acts has to do with the good news that God's Spirit has been poured out on all flesh, including men and women, young and old alike (Acts 2), denominations and whole branches of the church have denied recognizing women as full and equal members in the body of Christ. Part of the reason there are so many branches of the Presbyterian Church family has to do with the unwillingness of some to believe that women are called as equal partners in ministry, that women can serve as elders and deacons and ministers of the Word and Sacrament, too. Statements of faith like the one we will say today put it plainly - we believe the Spirit "calls women and men to all ministries of the church" ([Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA](#)).

In my almost 30 years of ordained ministry, I can not imagine a church coming alive without the faithful presence and self-giving love of women disciples. Ordained or not, women have been the backbone of all areas of ministry, and I am proud to have worked with women who have taught me a lot about Jesus' call to love one another. Women who have taught me how to make God's Word come alive in my actions and in my speech. Women who sought to be faithful and showed perseverance in light of the obstacles they faced. I bet you know some of these women, too! My words are not meant to be taken as being a slight against any man and their witness and ministry in the church, but rather I'm offering an invitation this morning to let these seven verses about Tabitha open us to the gifts of women in ministry!

I understand that in March of last year, right before the pandemic closed things, the women of this church led a worship service giving gratitude to God for the gifts of so many of the female saints among us. Voices of both old and young disciples proclaimed how God indeed is at work in this community. I think maybe we should have a Sunday like that again!

In closing, a few questions to ponder:

- Who has been a Tabitha in your life?
- Who has given so much of themselves to you, that if you lost them, you would weep?
- In what way is God calling all of us to learn from Tabitha?
- In what way may God be calling us, men and women alike, calling us to quietly serve the vulnerable in our community?

It may be through simple acts of charity, acts of prayer and kindness. It may be doing something big and bold for God, who knows? However God is calling you, the invitation this morning is to slow down - don't rush by and miss the Tabitha's sitting around you - the ones who may be knitting quietly behind the scenes, doing acts of kindness day in and day out, making phone calls and writing letters to those who need a friend. Let's give thanks to those saints today, and may their witness inspire us to be the people God created us to be.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.