8-13-17 Rev. Amy Haines

Acts 9:36-42 The Discipleship of Dorcas Unlikely Heroes of the Bible Series

I have never claimed to be a seamstress. One time I sewed a button on Ken’s shorts, and my sewing job lasted less than a day. I am still amazed I was able to make a pillow in Girl Scouts and a Christmas Tree in home ec class.

My grandmothers, however, were master seamstresses. Grandma Beatty was a hand quilter, and I am thankful I have a few of her quilts. Grandma Palmer made many outfits for my sister Jen and I when we were younger, from Easter dresses to play outfits to Halloween costumes.

Are you one who is handy with a needle and thread, or have you ever known someone who was? If you or another came to mind, is sewing only for family and friends or for anyone in need, local or global?

In previous churches where I have served, one had a quilting rack set up in an unused classroom. As the women quilted, they also supported one another. Another church made t-shirt dresses for children in Haiti. Still another church cut and tied blankets for the local cancer support network. I have seen old jeans and scraps of fabric transformed into school bags for UMCOR kits. Even here we have women who crochet prayer shawls.

Sewing is not only a practical skill, often it is also a gift for those in need.

Such was the case for our final unlikely biblical hero of the summer, a New Testament disciple who went by two names, Tabitha and Dorcas, depending on whether you spoke Aramaic or Greek.

Dorcas lived in Joppa, a seaport along the Mediterranean Sea which is now known as Jaffa and is essentially a suburb of Tel Aviv. Joppa is about 35 miles away from Jerusalem, and about 30 miles away from Caesarea. Imagine traveling those distances on foot!

As a seaport city, Joppa was part of the important trade routes for the region. It was here that Jonah found a ship to Tarshish when he was fleeing the Lord’s instruction. It was also here that the cedars came inland for the building of Solomon’s Temple.

Joppa was an important city in the story of Acts, the story of the early church’s spread across the Roman Empire, for Joppa helped to tell the story of the Apostle Peter as he moved from demanding Christians become Jews to welcoming Gentile believers as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember that Jews and Gentiles had a long and contentious history. The Jews believed they were God’s chosen people, and that anyone who did not believe in the One True God were considered unclean. The apostle Peter was a faithful Jew, much like all of the disciples, and so was steeped in Jewish ritual that considered all contact with Gentile non-believers taboo.

Yet God had other plans. Following Jesus’ resurrection, before he ascended into heaven, he blessed the apostles and told them they would be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8)

I imagine at first they believed they would just proclaim Jesus as Messiah to the Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Yet as Christians were persecuted in the first century CE and spread throughout the Empire, God worked through these Christians, including Peter and Paul, to share the good news of Jesus to all people in all nations.

Peter’s acceptance of Gentile believers was a gradual process, which was assisted by his physical travel outside of Jerusalem in Samaria and Judea and to the ends of the earth. Peter followed Philip into Samaria to welcome new believers in that region. Later Peter traveled to Lydda where he healed Aeneas, a paralytic who had been bedridden for eight long years. From Lydda Peter was asked to travel to Joppa, where today’s Scripture takes place. From Joppa Peter was then asked to travel to Caesarea, where his acceptance of the Gentiles was complete with the baptism of Cornelius. Peter then returned to Jerusalem a changed man of heart and mind.

Peter’s interaction with Dorcas helped to authenticate Peter’s ministry and is the first recorded resurrection following Jesus’ own resurrection from the dead.

So what happened that day in Joppa? Thankfully, the book of Acts records in vivid details the events of the shocking reality of Dorcas’ death and incredible resurrection.

We are told she became ill and died. As was the custom, her body was washed and laid in an upper room, to be buried later that day. That she was placed in an upper room brings back memories to us of Jesus’ last supper with his disciples in an upper room. For the widows who cared for her body memories were brought back of their own grief at other times and in other upper rooms. So the grief in that room was palpable. Dorcas’ death was unexpected and a great loss to many.

Dorcas meant so much to that community of faith that they sent two men to Lydda to beg Peter to come to Joppa. In Lydda Peter had healed a paralytic named Aeneas who had been bedridden for eight years. Although about 12 miles separated the two towns, word of such a healing spread quickly from town to town.

What the saints and widows of Joppa wanted Peter to do is not recorded. Were they hoping for a miracle, for Dorcas to be brought back to life? Or did they just want Peter’s presence with them for a funeral, a burial blessing, or to share her story? We will never know.

What we do know is that Peter listened and then agreed to come, and hurried to Joppa before Dorcas could be buried on the day of her death. Upon his arrival in Joppa, Peter was greeted by the widows, mourning and weeping Dorcas’ death. They were eager to show Peter the tunics and clothing Dorcas was famous for sewing, including the ones that many of them wore even on that day. They were eager to share with Peter their stories of Dorcas’ life and generosity, her good works and compassion, and proclaim that all she did was to honor the Lord.

After listening to the stories, Peter then sent all of the mourners out of the upper room. In the stillness, in the quiet, in a room heavy with death, Peter knelt down and prayed. Then I imagine he prayed some more. Then, in a firm, loud voice Peter said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, and with Peter’s help, sat up. Dorcas, who was dead, was once again alive! After presenting her alive to the saints and widows of that Christian community, word of this miracle quickly spread.

Hearing her story, faithful Jews also remembered other such miracles in their faith history.

In 1 Kings Elijah raised the widow’s son and in 2 Kings Elisha raised the Shunemmite woman.

Peter’s words to Tabitha were similar to Jesus’ words to Jairus’ daughter in Luke 8.

What an incredible miracle! What an amazing turn of events!

A woman from Joppa raised from the dead by the disciple who began as a rural fisherman, was known to stick his foot in his mouth, and even betrayed Jesus three times in one night. That very same man was now the faithful conduit for the mighty power of God! Peter sought to be faithful to God’s call upon his life, and the power of the Holy Spirit moving through his ministry.

Yet often what gets lost in this incredible story of the strengthening of Peter’s faith is the discipleship of Dorcas, who I assume continued her faithful ways of charity and good works following her resurrection. Remember that women in the first century still had very few rights, were often viewed as property more than persons, and widows had to rely on the mercy of others around them to keep them alive, clothed and fed.

Yet Jesus valued women, in ways far ahead of his contemporary culture. Women accompanied Jesus on his journeys. They were financial contributors. Jesus respected them in conversation, from the woman at the well to sisters Mary and Martha. Women stayed with Jesus at the cross, while the disciples were in hiding. And women were the first witnesses to the resurrection.

The early church continued this favorable treatment of women, with many female leaders such as Phoebe and Mary, Priscilla and Eunice.

What is unique about Dorcas is that she is the ONLY female in the New Testament to be given the name disciple. While I am sure she was not the first, hers is the story chosen to be remembered throughout history, the only female to be called *mathetria*.

How she had heard of Jesus, how she had come to follow Jesus, our Scriptures do not say.

Yet by giving her the title of female disciple, she is seen as a full equivalent to the male disciples and saints of the early church, including the two who seek out Peter in Lydda. Dorcas is integral to the faith community in Joppa. Thus, she is our unlikely hero today not because of what she said, yet because of what she did and why.

Dorcas is first described as one “devoted to good works and acts of charity.” (9:36b NRSV)

“Her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need.” (9:36b MSG)

She used her skill with the needle to make clothing for widows. She was known, however, for more than her skill. She used her skill to reach out in compassionate ways toward others, especially the widows in her village.

Maybe she was like the wife of a United Methodist layman from central Ohio who decades ago described his wife as one who “sits up all night thinking about good things she can do for people and then does them.” --umcdiscipleship.org Easter 4

Dorcas was not a missionary. Or a preacher. Or a teacher. Or a miracle worker herself.

I imagine she saw herself as an ordinary woman with an ordinary skill who just happened to serve others as a disciple of Jesus.

Yet history remembers her because she was not simply ordinary. Dorcas is an example of a servant evangelist. Someone who will never be the preacher and may never serve as a committee chair. Yet someone whose discipleship was still valued because through her devotion and compassion she saw the needs of those around her and responded in practical ways to that need.

Disciples like Dorcas are the ones who see the hurts of others and work to heal those hurts in practical ways. Or as another pastor put it, this is “discipleship as a lifetime of intentional action.” --umcdiscipleship.org Easter 4

..In his book called, “The Conspiracy of Kindness,” Steve Sjogren states that while less than 10% of Christians have the spiritual gift of evangelism, 90% have the gift of serving. His church in Cincinnati is involved in what they call “servant evangelism,” where they have washed cars, cleaned toilets, shined shoes and grilled hot dogs in parks – all for free with no strings attached.

1 Peter 4:10 sums up the importance of serving: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms.” As we serve others, the church is strengthened and lost people are drawn to Christ.

--Brian Bill “Discovering Your Style (Part 3)” 5-29-03 sermoncentral.com

Whether or not you have the spiritual gift of helps or of service, we can all learn from Dorcas today how to impact our corner of the world around us.

It was Francis of Assisi who said, “At all times preach the gospel. When necessary, use words.”

--Brian Bill “God Uses Ordinary People: Tabitha” 7-13-08 sermoncentral.com

Many of you may have heard the phrase attributed to John Wesley:

“Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can,

in all the places you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

What these quotes remind us is to follow in Dorcas’ footsteps and live by John Wesley’s Second General Rule: Do Good. Whenever. Wherever. However. To Whomever. Do Good.

We are each and every one called to use the gifts that God has given us to influence the world around us, all to the glory of the Lord. And wouldn’t you agree, especially after the events of this weekend in Virginia, that we need more hope and charity, more compassion and care in our world today?

How we each live by good works and acts of charity and attitudes of compassion will vary as much as our personalities and lifestyles. Some people can teach; others love to learn. Some people love to give out hugs, while others will simply smile even as they remain at arm’s length. Some here today can sew. Others cannot. If not, what else can you do?

We each have differing skills, differing gifts, differing ways to express our compassion. Yet in whatever we do, we are called to do good, in kind ways, as an expression of our love for Jesus.

What is one way, in one specific location, to one person or group of people, that you can live in the footsteps of Dorcas, living out your faith in Jesus in an intentionally loving way?

Are you one who can sew?

Are you one who can mentor students?

Are you one who can share your trade knowledge with another?

Are you willing to write to elected officials on social issues?

Are you willing to stand up for a stranger when you see them being harassed?

Are you willing to love others as you find them?

Would you care for youth?

Would you visit the elderly?

Would you be a sounding board for a young parent?

Dorcas was known for her sewing and acts of charity. What are we known for by family and friends, strangers and neighbors? And are what we are known for a conduit for God’s grace?

Dorcas is the final unlikely hero of the bible that we have time to learn from this summer during worship. Yet there are many more ordinary men and women in the Bible who sought to be faithful to God. In the weeks and months and years ahead, learn their stories and reflect on what they teach you about living by faith today.

Then as you go about your ordinary, everyday life, my prayer is that you have learned from these heroes this summer how God calls you to follow in their footsteps. Live in trust and hope,

live by courage and faith, move ever deeper step by faithful step in your love for God and love for one another.

May we be open to God’s guidance on this journey we call faith in the midst of everyday life.

May it be so. Let us pray.