

“The People With the Power”
Acts 9:36-42
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Last Sunday, I talked about being dangerous, about being disciples who live like we have nothing to lose and who are, therefore, in the eyes of the world, very threatening, maybe even menacing. In the radical way they loved and cared for one another, the early church was such a threat to the Empire, and on the road to Damascus, the Apostle Paul suddenly found himself to be a person with nothing to lose, and became far more dangerous as a Christian than he ever was as a Pharisee. I hope you spent this past week feeling a little more dangerous.

Being dangerous is, of course, but one of many ways to characterize the Christian life, a life we are meant to explore more deeply in these weeks following Easter. Another way to think about our response to the resurrection is represented in tonight’s story about the miraculous raising of a certain disciple named Tabitha, but the characteristic under discussion may not be what you think. You see, as important as it is to be dangerous, and in this story, Peter would be looking pretty dangerous representing the culture of life over that of death, and as important as it is to do the miraculous, there is also great virtue in being simply indispensably mundane, that wonderful attribute of Tabitha, who, perhaps for being just that, is the only woman in the New Testament described specifically by the word “disciple.”

It is easy to look at this story and say that a miracle took place that day in Joppa, that day Peter knelt down and prayed, turned to the body of a dead woman and said “Tabitha, get up” and she did. But I’m here to tell you that the real miracle of this story is not that Peter raised someone from the dead. No, my friends, the miracle is that through the power of Jesus Christ, this faithful disciple, this Tabitha, was so “devoted to good works and acts of charity” that Peter was summoned to do the miraculous in the first place. You see, with the death of Tabitha, a woman whose fabrics had pulled a community together, the fabric of her community was torn apart, irreparably damaged like a ripped piece of cloth that can never be restored to its original state. “All the widows,” it says, “all the widows stood beside Peter weeping and showing tunics and other clothing Dorcas had made while she was with them.” Here is a woman who was integral to her community, whose life, so remarkably undramatic, was so critically necessary, when we remember that widows had among the hardest lives to be had in those times. Here is a woman whose passing is lamented with weeping and the desperate search for someone who can do something. And though in the end, Peter comes out looking like the star, and make no mistake, his contribution is very important, but even though the focus is on the use of Peter gift’s through the power of Christ, it is the Tabithas of the world who are the great heroes of the faith. They are the people with the power.

The book of Acts is a veritable who's who of the heroes of the faith. The number of canonized saints found here can fill up the liturgical calendar faster than you can say Episcopalian. But you see, for every Peter who can raise the dead, and for every Phillip who can persuade an Ethiopian, and every Stephen who can so shame a crowd with his words and faith that they would stone him, there are a hundred Tabithas laboring for the Lord in ways that affect their communities in the profoundest of ways, a hundred Tabithas whose passing leaves a hole not easily filled. You know these Tabithas. Take a look around you. See your brothers and sisters in the faith who give of themselves routinely in ways you may never know about, but that *someone* experiences. See your fellow members of this church who put in long hours at work and then come here to sing or to plan or to serve meals, who share their precious hours and their precious dollars to make this church mean something to this community in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. See your yokefellows in Christ who put their bodies or their reputations or their emotional well-being on the line in their jobs because they know Christ has called them to do their part to announce the year of the Lord's favor, to feed Christ's sheep, to clothe the naked, to be a resurrection people in a culture of death. These are the people who are the true inheritors of Jesus' mission, these are the people with whom Christ has chosen to share the load, the

weight of the cross, the call to ministry which is at once immensely heavy and blessedly light. This is you.

You've probably heard it said that in any given Church there is one pastor, but many ministers. It may seem like a mere turn of a phrase, but it's true. Do you believe it? Do you see yourselves as ministers, as persons in the service of Christ's mission in the world? Do you see yourselves as the spiritual descendants of these great characters in the book of Acts, these first generation followers of Jesus Christ to whom the Holy Spirit gave all kinds of awesome gifts? And even if you do, do you think you measure up? I mean, it's hard when you look at Peter and he's raising people from the dead. Um, I can play the trumpet. I can make lemon bars. I can put back together the lawn mower my cousin took apart. Sometimes what we *can* do seems like so little that it doesn't seem worth doing at all, and it certainly isn't ministry. And so you may be thinking, "Don't give me all that malarkey about 'You're *all* ministers.' "

This is, of course, the great conundrum about celebrating gifts. Some gifts seem to be more valuable than others. What's running the soundboard compared to resuscitating the dead? How do we hold a candle next to the big guns of our tradition? And so when we come to a story like today's in which Peter does a dramatic, Jesus-like thing, a story in which it is miraculously demonstrated that the mantle and ministry of Jesus have been passed to his disciples, a story in which

the very power of God is on display, and it is easy to think that our little light is better kept under its bushel basket, lest it be invisible next to the blinding light of the miraculous. But when's the last time you saw something on the order of what Peter did? Don't misunderstand me. I believe the miraculous happens. But it is in the indispensably mundane that we really spend most of our time and ministry.

And I know how tempting it is to say, "I can't do what Peter did, raising people from the dead! I can't help Jesus that way!" Maybe not. But truly I tell you that you can help shoulder Christ's burden as Tabitha did, sewing one garment at a time, by being a good and faithful spouse, parent, or child one day at a time, by brightening someone's day one smile or visit at a time, by standing up for what's right and good in the world one challenge at a time, by keeping hope alive one prayer at a time, by building the kingdom giving one gift at a time. This is ministry that matters my friends, in the everyday. It is, I believe, a greater testament to one's faith to persevere in the mundane than to rise to the occasion of the miraculous. God bless Tabitha for her quiet and tangible witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

This story should provoke us not only on a personal level, but at the level of our common life together. Is the Church, or is our church, indispensably mundane? And how would we know? One of the ways I have found useful to think about whether a congregation is "playing church" or is engaged in Gospel

ministry is to apply what I call the parking lot test, although it could be called the Tabitha test. The test is this: if we closed our doors, thinking more specifically in terms of a congregation with its own building, but if we closed and padlocked the doors of the church and turned off the lights, would anyone but our own members be sorry to see us go? Would they care, or would they rejoice that there could now be more room for a parking lot near the university, or for more condos, or some other public use? Would anyone outside the church's membership raise up a lament and mourn, or picket and write letters to the editor of the local paper pleading for it to stay open. Would they send for Peter, so to speak, to save something indispensable to the community from a premature demise? Indeed, this is what happened in our story about Tabitha. Of course Tabitha's widow friends would have been upset at the death of their friend. But people die every day and we don't seek out the Peters of the world. We just accept that it was their time to go. But these members of her community, so touched by Tabitha, could not let it rest. They made their grief and loss felt and so the disciples were moved to send for Peter. They realized what had been lost and took action. What a testimony to the life and witness of the indispensably mundane Tabitha! Do we have such a testimony in our community?

In this week's Emerge, I posted a poem that I think captures the sense of the importance of being indispensable mundane. Listen now to that poem, "What I

Learned From My Mother" By Julia Kasdorf, and see if you can't hear Tabitha's

voice echoing down through the centuries:

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds. I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household, to cube home-canned pears
and peaches, to slice through maroon grape skins
and flick out the sexual seeds with a knife point.
I learned to attend the viewing even if I didn't know
the deceased, to press the moist hands
of the living, to look in their eyes and offer
sympathy, as though I understood loss even then.
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.
I learned to believe I had the power to ease
awful pains materially like an angel.
Like a doctor, I learned to create
from another's suffering my own usefulness, and once
you know how to do this, you can never refuse.
To every house you enter, you must offer
healing: a chocolate cake you baked yourself,
the blessing of your voice, your chaste touch.

May each of our lives, and that of our church, be such a blessing to the world in
the way of Tabitha, who was called Dorcas, which means, Gazelle. Amen.