

SAVING TABITHA

Acts 9: 36-43

Sunday Recognizing the Gifts of Women
Northwood Presbyterian Church, Clearwater, FL
April 25, 2010

I want to tell you, today, about Tabitha. This one passage is **all we know** about Tabitha, but you'll "get it" because you've known women just like her: women who are real servants of Jesus, real saints in the fellowship of believers, women with many gifts for ministry. And men too, men with gifts of faith and ministry.

So, let's look at Tabitha and this story about her.

It seems from this passage that Tabitha was special. Even her name was special: Tabitha.

Tabitha is Aramaic and means "gazelle." Gazelles are swift, graceful, and beautiful desert animals. For Arabic people the gazelle is symbolic of female beauty. Apparently the name fit, because in Acts Luke makes a point of translating the name. The people of the church *must have sometimes called her Gazelle... or Dorcas*, which is the Greek word for gazelle.

I imagine that Tabitha was a little like a gazelle: graceful and quiet, always busy, always helpful. Let me describe her, based on what we are told in this story. **Tabitha was a seamstress.** Her hands stayed busy sewing blankets and quilts and clothing. She loved to knit shawls like the ones Chris Curvin and Paul Means take to the sick in the hospital. She made clothes for those who didn't have any and left them on their doorstep. Today she would make caps for babies in the Neo-natal units of hospitals.

Tabitha was a widow.

Jesus once praised a widow for putting two pennies in the offering. The widow could have put in one penny and kept the other for herself; no one would have blamed her for that, not even Jesus. But her heart was completely generous. If she had anything, she was willing to give it to others. *Tabitha was like that.* She didn't have much, but she had a heart for others, skilled hands and fingers, and (always) a smile for everyone.

It was Tabitha's strong belief **that God wanted us to care for those who had little.** ... "the least of these" she would call them, using Jesus' words. Tabitha followed that belief in her daily life and inspired many to do good deeds like she did.

But the amazing thing about Tabitha was **her belief that as a church** the disciples of Jesus should care for whoever had need in our midst, especially widows and orphans. She preached

about that, and made sure everyone who worshipped Jesus, knew when there was a particular need.

In our day she would have been elected to the Session and chair of the Mission and Outreach Committee. Tabitha would alert us all to the needs around us, and with gentle but persistent reminders she would let us know what we could do. ***You know***, she might say, ***there's a family without food down at Safety Harbor... There are youth who would like to go to Conyers on the Mission Trip but can't afford the registration... Because of the cold winter this year the farm workers have had a hard time. We need to help them.*** She would always be the first to ***send*** or ***bring*** or ***do*** what she could.

I imagine that when Tabitha stayed home in the evenings to sew on her projects, others would gather at her house. She would sing Psalms or recite passages from the Prophets. She would invite the group to read or tell stories about Jesus, remembering his teachings. At her house there would be a women's Circle learning, praying, and quietly reaching out to help those in need. That's the kind of person Tabitha was. No wonder the men, as well as the women, of the church referred to Tabitha with the special term: ***disciple***, even though that was an unusual term to be used of women. Everyone respected Tabitha and asked her opinions.

I know that every church has women like Tabitha... women who love Jesus deeply, and who follow him in unselfish ways. Women who welcome others and minister to them in whatever ways they can.

Why, ***here at Northwood you have women who*** sing, and teach, and serve communion, and work with the Kitchen Crew to prepare meals. You have women on the Session, women who are Deacons, women who are Stephen Ministers. I hear you even have women out working in the gardens areas with Mr. Bill.

Such brave women!

Such faithful women! Don't we all want to be like them?

The story of Tabitha's death is compelling. We don't know whether her death was sudden or the result of a prolonged illness. We just don't know. What we do know is that Tabitha's death caused a gathering of the saints, the people of the Christian community in Joppa, where she had lived. The women and men gathered there and shared their grief at the loss of Tabitha. They told stories of her generosity and her good deeds. They got out examples of her sewing and showed the things Tabitha had provided for others: ***She made me this apron.... She brought this blanket for my baby.... She made this dress with her own hands last year***

because she knew I was too sick to sew. The tributes they offered about Tabitha were rich and wonderful.

The whole church community had gathered in grief. And realizing that Peter was in a town not far away they sent for him. Tabitha was a leader in the church, beloved by all, and they probably felt that Peter should be told of their loss. ***Come quickly*** they said in their message. ***We need you!*** We are hurting and we need a pastor; that's what I think they meant.

But doesn't it sound a little like when Lazarus died and Jesus came? Don't we imagine the tears and sobs of the sisters and the people of Bethany? Don't we remember how Jesus wept, too, at the death of Lazarus, his friend?

Peter arrived and saw, heard and felt the tributes to Tabitha, to Gazelle. He appreciated the special place Tabitha had in that church, just like many of the dear respected and beloved men and women Northwood has lost through the years. The church community wept with loss.

Having come to be with them, Peter could have offered to lead in prayer. As a good pastor and friend, he could have offered a loving prayer. And he could have reminded all the saints of the promise Jesus made us: that there are many rooms in the Father's house and that Jesus would come for his disciples to take him there himself.

But somehow, the Spirit of God led Peter to do something more, something remarkable. He had everyone leave the room, and he knelt by the bedside and prayed.... A strong prayer, a heartfelt prayer. Then Peter took Tabitha by the hand and told her to get up. Arise. Anistemi. The same Greek word that is used about Jesus' resurrection when Peter preached at Pentecost: this Jesus God raised up. ANISTEMI. Now Peter calls on God to raise up Tabitha. He saves her.

No. Not really. Peter doesn't save Tabitha. She has already been saved by Jesus. As she rises here from her death, those who love her know that she will die again, just like each of us. Each of us will someday come to the end of this earthly life. Like those of us who have faith in Christ Jesus, Tabitha has already been saved by Jesus to go someday to live in one of those heavenly rooms, heavenly mansions. But not yet. She will still face the end of her earthly life.

In this event, described by Luke in Acts, Peter honors the grief of the community and calls on the power of Jesus to save Tabitha to rise, to continue in her earthly life.

This is truly an amazing story. This story tells us how strong the bonds are in the church. You already know that: you feel those bonds here as you live and worship and learn and serve Jesus Christ together here at Northwood. I hope that you will continue to honor the experience of

grief, and to celebrate the powerful comfort of your memorial Garden, and your memorial services and lovely receptions that honor the grief of the family of faith.

This is an amazing story. It tells us how much power there is vested in the church. For when we kneel and pray, when we ask amazing things of our Lord, we are then able to DO amazing things in his name. That's a big part of this story.... Letting us see the power of Jesus continuing after his death and resurrection, after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, bringing power to us, the church.

The story of Tabitha is a story of the church, where each of us brings our gifts of faith and compassion and skill where each of us has an important role to play in the body of Christ the church where together our prayers can wield power

And like Gazelle, Tabitha, we are saved. We are saved by the blood and grace of Christ our Lord. When we die in this life, we will go to live with him forever.

Let us celebrate Tabitha today, and all the saints like her in ages past and right here among us. Let us commit ourselves to be like her and like them, giving our gifts and abilities, living our faith as God calls us. And let us treasure this community of faith, the fellowship of the church, where our joys, our sorrows, our hopes and even our griefs bind us together in the very Spirit of Christ the risen Lord.

Amen.