

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter – April 17, 2016**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Acts 9:36-43**

**For Reflection**

**“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.”**

- Saint Augustine (354-430 c.e.)

**Tabitha’s Hands**

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha.

**Random factoid:** *In Greek nouns have both masculine and feminine forms. This is the only occurrence in the entire Christian Testament of the feminine form of the word “disciple”.*

Study bibles and scholars tell us that this text, nestled between a healing story and a conversion story, is about Peter performing miracles in the tradition of the prophets and Jesus – leading to the conversion of many to the Jesus Movement – hence increasing church membership. However, if you take it on its own, it’s about reviving and retaining the most productive member of the church so that the community won’t lose heart. And both of those statements are both true and false.

Converting people to the Jesus Movement (not yet called Christianity – still a Jewish sect) wasn’t about numbers for numbers sake or an increase in pledges. It was about converting people’s hearts so they would care about the orphan, widow and slave – and use available resources to help those in need in the community. The resurrection of Tabitha wasn’t just about her productivity – but about her generosity and compassion. It lifted up her “discipleship” if you will – not her particular beliefs about the risen Christ – but her dedication to service to others.

**Random factoid:** *The Greek construct used in this passage indicates that the widows were the recipients of her charity, but she may also have been a widow herself.*

Tabitha was a seamstress – or at least talented with a needle and thread and fabric. She was specifically a maker of tunics– a rather ubiquitous form of clothing worn by both women and men. The text also indicates that Peter stayed with a tanner while in town. Seamstresses and tanners were working class – not rich or particularly poor. So our basic story is probably about very ordinary people doing what they can do to take care of each other.

**Random factoid:** *Tabitha is an Aramaic name; the Greek translation is Dorcas. Both words mean "gazelle". One species of gazelle in Africa and Arabia is now known as the dorcas gazelle which seems a bit repetitive to me. "Dorcas gazelles are highly adapted to the desert; they can go their entire lives without drinking, as they can get all of the moisture they need from the plants in their diets, though they do drink when water is available."* ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorcas\\_gazelle](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorcas_gazelle)) *Adaptive and resourceful would be an apt description of gazelles including our Dorcas.*

Adaptive and resourceful is also THE description of individuals and communities that survive. Widows and widowers – ancient or in our time – have to adapt to life without a partner – whether that partner was the breadwinner or not – a helpmate or not. In any age, women who did not have a back-up plan and skills to manage if their male counterparts died were in deep trouble – financially or with life-skills. Survivors were and are the ones who know or can learn how to barter and negotiate, drive or get around town, create income and budget accordingly. Those who can find ways to turn their passions and natural skills into a vocation are doubly lucky. And those who can find or create community – a village of support in which to participate and find strength – are likely to thrive – not just survive.

Of course, if you can go your whole life without drinking water – that's a bonus.

Part of being adaptive and resourceful is making oneself useful to others. Many survivors of the WWII Holocaust did just that – some reluctantly were made useful to their captors, some positioning themselves to help other inmates from this proximity to the guards and officers – others used medical, accounting or crafting skills to help other inmates directly. Actually having a purpose and serving others has been credited with keeping any number of prisoners alive under horrific circumstances.

The same is true in more common circumstances.

An author whose name I can't pronounce (Macrina Wiederkehr) writes:

I witnessed a little girl helping her brother get a drink at the water fountain.

Attempting to lift him to the proper height turned out to be impossible. I was just at the point of giving them some assistance when quick as lightning she darted

over to a shoeshine man, pointed to a footstool he wasn't using, dragged it to the water fountain, and very gently lifted up her thirsty brother. It all happened so fast and it was so simple, yet it turned out to be a moment of beauty that became a prayer for me.

from "A Tree Full of Angels", p.328 in Spiritual Literacy by Brussat

**Random factoid:** *St. Tabitha has a feast day – January 27 for Episcopalians and ELC Lutherans – October 25 for Catholics and Missouri Synod Lutherans.*

I'm pretty sure that Tabitha did not do what she did in order to earn a feast day and be honored by her church community. If she had – her sister widows might have just left her dead when the time came and Peter never would have been notified or come running to resuscitate her. It is much more likely that she did her work humbly – with an open heart, an understanding of the effects of poverty on human beings, a desire to mitigate that suffering. It is also possible that she NEEDED to help others in order to heal herself of life's wounds.

Writer Wayne Muller relates:

[how] Mohandas Gandhi once settled in a village and at once began serving the needs of the villagers who lived there. A friend inquired if Gandhi's objectives in serving the poor were purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied, "Not at all. I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk."

As Gandhi...points out, even as we serve others we are working on ourselves; every act, every word, every gesture of genuine compassion naturally nourishes our own hearts as well. It is not a question of who is healed first. When we attend to ourselves with compassion and mercy, more healing is made available for others. And when we serve others with an open and generous heart, great healing comes to us.

from "Legacy of the Heart", p.337 in Spiritual Literacy by Brussat

### **Random Learnings:**

- Self-compassion – as Nancy DeNero has taught – is woven into a healthy life of service. We can give more if we also give to ourselves. And service itself can feed us.
- We can serve others doing what we love and what we are good at. We can share who we actually are – without needing to contort ourselves or suffer along laboring at chores that are not in our skill set and cause us anxiety.

- Being adaptive and resourceful is a way to survive and thrive, even under duress. This particular church is an example of how to thrive after selling off its land and focusing more on mission, less on maintenance. The church at large is finding ways to adapt, bounce, emerge in new manifestations in this frenzied culture.
- Ordinary people doing ordinary things with a big heart make a difference in the world. Sometimes I lose sight of this and begin to feel discouraged by small acts of kindness or charity that are absorbed into the chaos of this city. But metaphors help us keep perspective. Tabitha made tunics. In the wake of the AIDS crisis, quilters across the nation and around the world made a memorial quilt – panel by panel. On October 11, 1987, the Quilt was displayed for the first time on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., during the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. It covered a space larger than a football field and included 1,920 panels.

<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>

One small stitch at a time. One lunch for a homeless hungry person. One borrowed stool for a thirsty child. One shade structure for social justice advocates and artists for their annual festival. One can of beans for the food pantry. One conversation on the sidewalk. One memorial panel. The quilt grows.

Tabitha's hands made a difference. Her story is told to inspire us to use our hands to make a difference.

May G-d bless all the hands that repair our world – one stitch at a time.

## **Acts 9:36-43**

36 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. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 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." 39 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. 40 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. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.

42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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## **Dorcas**

Dorcas (Greek: Δορκάδα/Δορκάς, Dorkáda/Dorkás; Aramaic: טבִּיתָא Ṭabīṭā) was a disciple who lived in Joppa, referenced in the Acts of the Apostles (9:36–42) in the New Testament.[1]

Acts recounts that when she died, she was mourned by "all the widows...crying and showing (Peter) the robes and other clothing that she had made while she was still with them" (Acts 9:39).[1] The Greek construct used in this passage indicates that the widows were the recipients of her charity,[2] but she may also have been a widow herself.[3] It is likely that she was a woman of some means, given her ability to help the poor.[4] The disciples present called upon Peter, who came from nearby Lydda to the place where her body was being laid out for burial, and raised her from the dead.[4]

This narrative concerning Tabitha/Dorcas indicates her prominence in the community at Joppa.[4][5] This might also be indicated by the fact that Peter took the trouble to come to her from a neighbouring city, when requested by the community members.

The name Dorcas is a Greek translation of the Aramaic name Tabitha, meaning "gazelle".[5] One species of gazelle is now known as the dorcas gazelle.[6]

## **In Christian tradition**

Dorcas, along with Lydia of Thyatira and Phoebe, is honored with a feast day on the liturgical calendar of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America on January 27.[7] The Evangelical Lutheran Church also places their joint commemoration on January 27, immediately after the male missionaries remembered after the feast of St. Paul's Conversion, but the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church commemorates these three faithful women on October 25.[7][8] The Catholic Church commemorates Dorcas (under the Aramaic version of her name, St Tabitha) on October 25,[9] the same date as the Eastern Church.[7] Dorcas societies, which provide clothing to the poor, are named after her.[5]

Basil of Caesarea refers to Dorcas as an example in his *Morals* (rule 74): "That a widow who enjoys sufficiently robust health should spend her life in works of zeal and solicitude, keeping in mind the words of the Apostle and the example of Dorcas." [10] She is also commemorated in poems by Robert Herrick ("The Widows' Tears: Or, Dirge of Dorcas") and George MacDonald ("Dorcas").

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dorcas>