

**A Necessary Life**  
**Acts 9:36-43**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**May 12, 2019**

Acts 9:36-43

<sup>36</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup>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." <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>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. <sup>41</sup>He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Sermon

The book of Acts is sort of like a yearbook of the early church.

It tells a story, but it doesn't tell the whole story...

it offers what the church decided should be remembered  
about its earliest days.

And like any high school or college yearbook,

its purpose is to give folks like us the ability  
to look back on the church's idealism and exuberance...  
to remember teachers long gone  
and people long dead...

and to discern the work of the Spirit  
that shaped and inspired  
this earliest community of believers.<sup>1</sup>

This morning we listened in as Luke,

acting as our yearbook editor,  
pauses to linger over one particular photo in the book.

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<sup>11</sup> Jon M. Walton, "What about Dorcas?" Christian Century, April 17, 2007, p. 16

Sandwiched between

the dramatic conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus  
and the equally dramatic conversion  
of the Gentile centurion Cornelius,

Luke includes this very brief story of Tabitha,

or in Greek Dorcas, whom Peter raised from the dead.

The way Luke remembers it,

Peter was told to go to Joppa without delay...

but when he arrived at Dorcas' house she had already died.

The wake was underway

and the room where Dorcas had been laid

was filled with friends who stood weeping

as they passed around afghans, sweaters, and shawls –

all handmade and given them by Dorcas.

These recipients of her good works were widows –

women without men –

who in that time were about as poor and vulnerable

as anyone could be.

Each woman in that room

had a story to tell about how Dorcas had touched her life –

each one could share about some selfless act of compassion

that Dorcas had performed for them.

For out of her own resources she had cared for them...

and in the most practical of ways:

by making sure they had clothes

to keep them warm on long, cold nights.

It was alongside this faithful “disciple” that Peter knelt down

and prayed for the power of resurrection life.

This was the first time a disciple of Jesus

had exercised the authority of life over death in this way.

And what Luke wants this photo  
in the early church's yearbook to communicate  
is that the resurrection power of Christ  
has now been passed to his apostles...  
that loosed from the bonds of death,  
Christ's resurrection power was now at work  
in the lives of this community of believers.

But why Dorcas?

What is it about her life  
that made HER death  
the occasion for Peter to do what he had seen Jesus do  
with the young daughter of Jairus?

Well, my hunch is that Peter did this for two reasons –

because of who Dorcas WAS...  
but even more because of who she was NOT.

Dorcas was NOT a silver-tongued, tall-steeple preacher...

she was not an oft-published theologian...  
there is no evidence she gave the church large financial gifts.

But she did win converts... she touched lives...

and for all we know, she may have influenced more people  
than anyone else in Joppa.

I grew up in a church

that separated boys from girls and men from women  
during the Sunday school hour.

Many of you may have as well.

Well, this week as I thought about Dorcas

I suddenly remembered that my grandmother –  
my father's mother –

was a member of a women's class...  
and that often these classes  
would be named after a key Biblical character.  
Can you guess what my grandmother's class was named?  
The Dorcas Class.  
Of course, it was a way to identify her class  
as being separate from another...  
but I remember it was much more than that.  
It was more than just a random name of a woman in the Bible  
because the members of his class  
were intentional about taking Dorcas as their mentor  
and role model and inspiration.  
And when they would invite other women to join their class,  
they were clear that they were the ones  
who took casseroles to families  
who had just had a new baby...  
they were the ones who collected coats and gloves  
for kids in the inner-city elementary school...  
they were the ones who baked cookies  
for Vacation Bible School...  
they were the ones who visited the church's homebound members.  
Dorcas took care of people.  
She made tunics and knitted afghans...  
she held hands and listened to the heartbreaks and joys  
of the widows in the church in Joppa.  
And the Dorcas Class of the Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church –  
like their namesake –  
put a human face on the compassion of Christ,  
both in our church and throughout the city of Atlanta.

One of the central emphases of the Protestant Reformation  
was our belief in the “priesthood of all believers.”

From the very beginning,

Martin Luther affirmed that every believer is a “priest”...  
that we do not need any other “religious professional”  
to stand between us and God...

and that each of us is responsible –

both for ourselves and for our neighbors before God.

Gone was the distinction between clergy and lay...

gone was the difference between sacred and secular work.<sup>2</sup>

Because in baptism every Christian is ordained a priest...

every Christian is called to occupy that space  
between heaven and earth...

every believer is meant to represent Christ  
to the world that he so loves.

And the reason the “priesthood of all believers”

is so important to me and to you

is that it provides the antidote to any notion  
that you are not needed by Jesus...  
that you are not important to this church...  
that you are in any way “dispensable.”

You may think, “Christ doesn’t need ME to do what he needs done...

the church doesn’t need me.”

Wrong!

Each one of you is a unique and gifted creation of God.

Each and every one of you is a part of the Body of Christ  
and has been given spiritual gifts

that witness to Jesus and build up the church.

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<sup>2</sup> John H. Leith, Introduction to the Reformed Faith (John Knox Press, 1977) p.113.

YOU are NOT dispensable. In fact, you are necessary!

You are necessary to the world...

and especially to this small piece of it called Hickory.

Yes, some of you because of your professions –

healing, teaching, social work,

serving in state and city government, the courts,

business and manufacturing, non-profit on boards,

leading community efforts

to address the challenges of our community –

what you do is important... I hope you know that.

And while we're on the subject,

did you know that the word "profession" – at its root –

means doing what you believe.

It means living your faith through what you do every day.

And then, there are others of you,

who like Dorcas, do what you NOT in the public eye –

who make your profession of faith

just as powerfully behind the scenes.

Dorcas made hers

by providing a vulnerable community with clothing...

which was no small task for Dorcas

since each garment meant spinning and weaving

and sewing by hand.

Like Dorcas, you make your profession of faith

in every single kindness you do...

driving our elderly members to church events...

sending cards to shut-ins on their birthdays...

preparing the elements for communion...

arranging flowers and baking cheese straws

for a funeral reception...

spending an afternoon babysitting for a single mother...  
knitting prayer shawls for folks  
who are facing an unknown future.

You make your profession of faith

in every single act of kindness you do.

I certainly can't name them all... only God can do that!

But I know that you offer them.

I know you offer them...

and because of that, I know that you are not dispensable.

Your life is necessary...

YOU are necessary to Christ and to this congregation.

When Peter arrived at Dorcas' house,

the widows had already washed her body

and laid her down in a room upstairs.

Lovingly they watched over her

as they told stories about the clothes Dorcas had made them.

"This coat... she wove it for me two winters ago

when my husband died and I could never get warm."

"Would you just look at the needlework on this gown?

Dorcas made it for my granddaughter when she was born."

"My son wore this shirt everyday until it almost fell apart."

And so it went... the stories poured out –

stories of spinning and weaving and sewing

all wrapped up in the spinning and weaving and sewing

of each of their lives.

And by showing those clothes...

telling stories about those clothes...

touching those clothes –

Dorcas' congregation touched

the very fabric of her life of service and compassion.

You may know that the root of the word “compassion”

means to “suffer with”...

to put yourself in the place of another...

to enter into their experience

so that you know what it is like

and they know they are not alone.

Well, a church without compassion –

a church without men and women

who are willing to follow the example of Dorcas –

is indeed an impoverished church.

The prayers may eloquently recited

the buildings may be well appointed

the theology may be rock solid

but none of these are enough

unless the church also has a few Dorcas –

folks who take food... who drop off flowers...

who write a note or call just because.

Trust me, my friends,

these gestures of kindness...

these acts of compassion... they MATTER!

Truly, they do!

I, for one, am glad Luke remembered the story of Dorcas

and made sure it made it into our yearbook.

Because Dorcas – though not one for public recognition –

Dorcas is an example of resurrection life in the Joppa church...

Her acts of compassion and caring expressed,

in a tangible and visible way,

something of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ.

And it is the same for you!

You are necessary to our world...

to this congregation...

and to God.

Psalm 23 reminds you of that...

just how precious you are to God.

And this story of Dorcas...

I hope it whispers this to you

just how important you are

and how powerful God can be in your life.