



Everyone Needs Dorcas in Their Life

TEXT
Acts 9:36-43

May 14, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

There were some elementary children who were asked why we have mothers. They responded:

—She’s the only one who knows where the Scotch tape is.

—To help us out when we are getting born.

Why do you have your mom and not some other mom?

—The doctor knew she likes me more than other people’s moms like me.

Why did your mom marry your dad?

—She got too old to do anything else with him.

—My grandma says that mom didn’t have her thinking cap on.

As we age, we get a different perspective.

When I was in second grade, Mom is the one who drove to Parents’ Day at summer camp. Summer camp had been my first experience of homesickness. Seeing her arrive for Parents’ Day was the first time I remember crying for joy.

In sixth grade, she stayed up all night making a plaster of Paris map of Pearl Harbor for my history report. It was not to scale.

She gave countless piano lessons — 30 minutes for \$6 — so that I could go to college.

She delighted in my ordinariness.

I know not all mothers are cut from the same cloth. My childhood neighbor Glen had a mother who was none of these things. She was harsh. But for the fortunate among us, there is a kindness associated with mom.

I can’t get through a Mother’s Day without remembering Billy Collins’ poem about giving his mother a lanyard which he made at summer camp. Just a few lines:

*She gave me life and milk
from her breasts,*

and I gave her a lanyard.

*She nursed me in many a
sick room,*

*lifted spoons of medicine to
my lips,*

*laid cold face-cloths on my
forehead,*

*and then led me out into the
airy light*

*and taught me to walk and
swim,*

*and I, in turn, presented her
with a lanyard.*

*Here are thousands of meals,
she said,*

*and here is clothing and a
good education.*

*And here is your lanyard, I
replied,*

*which I made with a little
help from a counselor. ...*

*And here, I wish to say to
her now,*

*is a smaller gift — not the
worn truth*

*that you can never repay
your mother,*

*but the rueful admission that
when she took*

*the two-tone lanyard from
my hand,*

*I was as sure as a boy could
be*

*that this useless, worthless
thing I wove*

*out of boredom would be
enough to make us even.¹*

For the fortunate among us, there is a kindness we associate with mom, even if it takes us a while to see it.

I don’t know if Tabitha had children, but she was a mother figure in Joppa. Tabitha was one of those people in scripture with two names, like Saul who becomes Paul, or Sarai who becomes Sarah, or Simon who becomes Peter. Except Tabitha doesn’t become Dorcas; she remains both at the same time. Tabitha is her Aramaic name. Dorcas is her Greek name. Both mean gazelle. It’s important that she had both names at the same time.

When she died, they sent for the Apostle Peter. *Come quick!* Peter knew her as Tabitha. She

wasn't a preacher. She wasn't a deacon, like Stephen. (Do you remember him from last Sunday?) She didn't write theology or teach classes. What she did was notice people. She showed kindness to folks when they needed it most.

When Peter arrived, the house was already full. Casseroles and finger sandwiches covered the kitchen countertops. Peter went to the upper room where her body had been prepared. It was one of those moments when you don't know what to pray; you just know you need to pray. The apostle knelt by her lifeless body and lifted the broken hearts of an entire community to God. She got up.

My friend Jon Walton, of First Presbyterian Church in New York, says of this moment, "I can't explain it in terms that satisfy. I only know that the witness of the early church is that this happened, and it was every bit as improbable and inexplicable to them as it is to us, which is why they want us to know about it. And like all of these stories, the wonder and true miracle is not the contravention of natural laws so much as the reversal of human expectations and the work that God is doing in our midst that we wouldn't notice unless something remarkable like this happened."²

This moment, if I understand the text, insists that the power of the risen Christ is found in his followers. That's why, in this story of Acts filled with heroes of the early church — heroes like Peter and Paul writing their letters and getting shipwrecked,

preaching and forming churches, getting flogged and run out of town — Acts is filled with stories like that.

But here, Luke lingers a bit and pays attention to this little-known disciple with two names. Tabitha wasn't a leader. She never preached a sermon. There are no epistles from Dorcas. We know of no courageous deeds she performed.³

So why do we need to know her? She was kind.

When Peter arrived, he found her friends gathered in grief, widows mostly. They came with their tears and their casseroles, and they began bringing the clothing that Dorcas had stitched for them. They may not have realized all that she had done among them until that very moment. They clutched the tunics she had sewn for them.

Like our Tuesday morning women who gather around sewing machines and conversation, Dorcas spent her nights crafting countless shawls to cover chilled shoulders.⁴ These women were overlooked by most, left alone in their grief, and also by society. The status of widows in those days was precarious.⁵

But Dorcas was a friend to them. In every stitch was a bit of grace and kindness. She was a conversation partner over coffee and a bright light in a dark season. Like a gazelle, she darted from need to need bringing kindness.

I think Luke lingers with this disciple with two names to remind the church that we are nothing if we aren't kind.

Philip Simmons, a former English Professor at Lake Forest College in Illinois, was 35 years old when diagnosed with ALS. He battled ALS for 10 years. During those years, he wrote *Learning to Fall*. He wrote: "We know we are truly grown up when we stop trying to fix people. About all we can really do for people is love them and treat them with kindness. ... Others don't need 'fixing' so much as simple kindness."⁶

If that is what it is to be a grown-up, then Dorcas was a grown-up. Dorcas was kind. I'm sure the people she cared for were like people you know — some of them brooding; some of them depressed; some of them angry at the cards life had dealt. But she didn't try to fix them; she just showed kindness.

I think Luke is saying it is kindness that reveals the resurrected one alive in the church.

She had two names. One was Aramaic: Tabitha. That's the name Peter knew. Jews, like Jesus himself, spoke Aramaic. But she also had a Gentile name, a Greek name: Dorcas.

Do you know the most difficult, complex, all-consuming social issue of the early church? It was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. To say "relationship" was something new. For a thousand years, Jews were set apart from Gentiles. One way to define being Jewish is to say you were not Gentile.

The world was divided. They didn't share meals; they didn't share worship; they didn't share food; they didn't share language. They were divided.

Now if you read to the end of Acts, you discover the most amazing thing: Jews and Gentiles become family. They worship together. They eat together. They learn to love one another.

But before any of that happens, here is Tabitha. That's how Peter would have known her, by her Jewish name. But her heart was too big to be defined by one people. She was also known as Dorcas. That's the name her Gentile friends gave her. I think this woman built a bridge of kindness between estranged peoples, and it changed the church. It changed the world.

I have learned this. We all need someone like Dorcas in our lives. For the fortunate among us, our mothers may have been such a person. But this is a story for the church family. The church is nothing without kindness.

Fred Craddock was preaching in his home church back in Humboldt, Tennessee. After worship, he was slipping through the choir room when he saw a woman hanging up her choir robe. He said, "The choir sounded good today; one of my favorite anthems."

She said, "I hope so because that's it."

He said, "What do you mean? Are you retiring?" She had sung in choir for 108 years. He thought she might be retiring.

"I'm quitting."

"What do you mean you are quitting? You can't quit."

She said, "I'm quitting."

It bothered him, so the next day he went to see her. "Why are you quitting?"

She said, "I looked out from that choir loft at all those people, and I realized what has haunted me for years."

"What's that?" Fred asked.

She said, "They don't care."

"What do you mean they don't care?"

"Nobody cares," she said.

He said, "You are wrong. People care. I've traveled the church all over, and it is filled with people who care." Fred said, "You are wrong."

She said, "You really think so?"

He said, "Yes."

She said, "OK, name one."

"What do you mean?"

"If you are so sure, name one."

"You want names?"

"Yes, I want names."

I suppose we could tell her the story of Tabitha, but she's not around anymore. So I guess I'm asking today, would you mind if I give her your name?

¹Billy Collins, "The Lan-yard," *The Trouble With Poetry and Other Poems* (2007), p. 45

²This paragraph is the language and faith of Jon Walton, shared in a paper for the Movable Feast, January 2001.

³Again, grateful to Jon Walton for this language.

⁴Walton again.

⁵Harper's Bible Dictionary, p. 1132

⁶Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall* (2000), pp. 12–13

⁷This story, including the last line of the sermon, is from Fred Craddock, but I no longer have the citation.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.