



VILLAGE
CHURCH
Presbyterian (USA)

Do the Good That is Yours to Do

SCRIPTURE:
Acts 9:36-43

October 8, 2023 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Do the good that is yours to do. It is a phrase we have been lifting up at Village Church in recent years. It reflects the hope that the redemptive love of God is a power in our lives and in the world.

If you were to read through the book of Acts from beginning to end, you would see that one of the main points is that the risen Christ sometimes shows up in the church. Sometimes the church is shaped by the life of Christ in such a profound way that we look like Jesus. As scholar Willie Jennings says, the church “repeats Jesus.”¹

This is a story about Peter. Peter was that first-string apostle who, along with Paul, gave shape to the early church. Here Peter is summoned to Joppa because a beloved saint of the church had died. Her name was Tabitha, although some called her Dorcus. We have never heard of Tabitha before and we will not hear of her again, but her death is important enough to the saints in Joppa that they summon Peter. We don’t know much about Tabitha, but we do know this: She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She was kind. And we also know she had two names.

Peter comes and Peter ‘repeats Jesus.’ There was a moment when Jesus was summoned by a leader in the synagogue named Jairus. “Can you come? My daughter is dying.” By the time Jesus arrives, the little girl had died. But Jesus kneels before her and says, “Talitha, cumi,” (which means, “Little girl, get up”). And she does.

Well, here, Peter comes to Joppa where Tabitha had died and he says, “Tabitha, get up.” And the dead woman breathes. Peter repeats Jesus.

It is clear that the writer of Acts believes that you and I, too, should repeat Jesus. But I can’t relate to this moment.

I believe that God brings life from death. As I have told you on Sunday mornings—and also on most other days of the week over the years—I believe the love of God simply refuses to let go of us. I believe that God brings life from death. But I can’t do that. The power of my faith is far more modest.

To say it more broadly, the world we live in is a mess. There is so much that has gone wrong and we seem powerless to make it right. I wish I were more like Peter because some dramatic expressions of grace, some dramatic expressions of light, some dramatic expressions of love would do this world good.

But the truth is when I read this story of Peter, it makes me feel that the witness of the church these days is more ordinary. We simply do not have the influence on the world we once assumed we had.

This is a story about Peter, yes, but maybe even more than that, it is a story about this woman. Tabitha is her Aramaic, or Jewish, name. It’s what Peter calls her. It is her Greek friends who call her Dorcus. Both names mean ‘gazelle.’ And if I understand the text, she bears these names because this gazelle woman darted around this community engaging in acts of kindness. She sewed clothing and shared it. It was kind. And because she was so kind, she needed two names.

When I was a kid, I was called ‘Tommy.’ There are still some folks from my home church that call me that. Every now and then I get an email or a Facebook message that starts, “Dear Tommy.” I don’t need to read to the end to know this comes from someone with ties to Shallowford Church in Atlanta. The enlightened ones will put the ‘my’ in parenthesis. Of course, ‘Tommy’ was better than my middle name, which you will remember is Lorraine. In my experience, many people consider Lorraine to be a girl’s name, which is why in second grade Frank

1 Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (2017) p. 100.

Chambless, who had a grandmother named Lorraine, just called me, ‘Granny.’ Frank was so funny.

I asked my dad once why he did this to me. I’m a junior; he gave me his name. I said, “You know what this is like. Why did you do this to me?” He said that he always wanted the world to know we belonged to one another. I hated Lorraine as a kid and I’m not crazy about Tommy now, but belonging? I am so grateful for that.

In a similar way, this woman has two names because she belonged. She had two names because she was loved. And because of who loved her, this woman is something of a miracle.

A little church history: the most difficult, complex, all-consuming social issue of the early church was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The issue was racism. For a 1,000 years, Jews were set apart from Gentiles. One way to define being Jewish was to say you were not Gentile. They didn’t share meals, they didn’t share worship, they didn’t share food. They didn’t share religion. They were divided.

Now, by the end of Acts, you discover the most amazing thing: In the church, these two worlds are coming together. Jews and Gentiles are becoming family. They worship together. They eat together. They learn to love one another. There were still issues, of course, but the division that was assumed eternal, was being bridged.

And as this is beginning, there is this woman with two names who lives as a bridge between divided peoples. Her name 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.

How did she become beloved in both communities? How did she break down these walls that had stood for generations and create community where only division had existed before? I think it was because she was kind.

When Peter arrived, it says the widows of the community gathered around holding tunics and shawls and blankets Tabitha had made. She had darted from need to need bringing gifts—showing kindness. To Tabitha, it didn’t matter who you were; it just mattered that you had a need. Maybe your need was because you were victimized in some way,

maybe your need was because you had made dumb choices. It didn’t matter. She just lived kindness. It wasn’t the biggest thing and yet it was. It was the good she knew to do.

Do you ever get discouraged by the way of the world these days? By changes in the planet that threaten us? By gun violence that is killing our children? By politics that celebrate obstructionism rather than seek to actually build anything up? Do you ever feel like the problems of the world are so strong there is nothing we can do? We need a first-string apostle to straighten things out—someone like Peter who can raise the dead. But I don’t know anyone like that. It can be discouraging, but then I remember this story of the woman with two names and how she did the good she knew to do and God used it to change the world.

Early in my ministry, Carol and I were in a dinner group with some friends in the church. We would gather once a month or so and have dinner in each other’s homes. When we hosted, we planned to serve apple pie for dessert. I don’t remember what else we had, but I remember I was looking forward to the apple pie. But when Carol brought dessert to the table, it didn’t look like apple pie.

I almost said, “I thought we were having pie?” But then I looked at her face and she was looking at me in a particular way. Perhaps you have seen an expression like this. Her eyes spoke, “You say one word and you will be sleeping in the shed until Jesus returns.” What I learned after our friends had gone home is that when retrieving the pie from the oven, it somehow had flipped over and splatted on a plate. Her first thought was that dessert had been ruined, but then my brilliant wife realized we were having apple cobbler for dessert, not apple pie. The pie-now-cobbler was delicious—a fact that I pointed out several times.

I remember that story because it is something of a parable. So many things in the world simply cannot be repaired and it can leave us feeling helpless. The pie can’t be put back into its original form. We live in a world broken by greed and apathy, by a celebration of incivility, and an unwillingness to do hard things. And is breaking us. Life is like that.

In the face of the world we live in, given the reality of the limited power we as people of faith really

have, I never feel like Peter—with faith enough to raise the dead. But Tabitha is the one who taught me the value of doing the good that is ours to do... and to let God do with that what God will do.

She was a friend to everyone in her community. 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 should never underestimate the power of love. It is a modest power, but it is a power. It is a vulnerable strength, but it is a strength.

We need a miracle of healing. We need a resurrection. We need kindness for the stranger and the immigrant. We need kindness for the political foe and the person of a different religion. People who are divided can be brought together in community. That's why we know of this remarkable woman with two names and we know of her because she was kind.

My prayer for you, Village, is to keep doing the good that is yours to do and the risen Christ may just show up in the church again and you might 'repeat Jesus.' It has happened before.