



Faith Should Be Good for Everyone

TEXT
Acts 9:32–43

May 5, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

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

That may sound like a fantasy to you. But it is a witness from the early church that I find hopeful and challenging.

This is a story about Peter — Peter, that first-string apostle who, along with Paul the outsider, gave shape to the early church. Here Peter is summoned to Joppa because a beloved saint of the church there 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 after this moment, but her death is important enough to the saints in Joppa that they summon Peter from Lydda.

We learn two things about Tabitha. One is that she had two names. The other is that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She was kind.

Peter comes and Peter “repeats Jesus.” Like Jesus with

Jairus’ daughter, do you remember, he said, “Child, get up,” and the dead girl breathed. So here, Peter says, “Tabitha, get up,” and the dead woman breathes.

I’m not going to pretend I can explain that. I’m not going to pretend that I think we can do the same. I’ve been in church a long time, and I have never seen the power of Christ show up in just this way. And yet, I think this story tells us something important. I think it gives us insight into the purpose of the church.

This is a story about Peter, but even more so, it is a story about this woman who is mentioned only here: Tabitha, that’s her Aramaic or Jewish name. It’s what Peter calls her. Her Greek friends call her Dorcus. Both names mean “gazelle.” And unless I completely miss it, I think because this woman darted around this community engaging in acts of kindness, I think that is why she had two names. Her names demonstrate that she belongs.

When I was a kid, I was called Tommy. There are still some folks from my home church who call me that. When I was in college, my suitemates gave me a nickname — and were you to mention that name, it would take me back to 305 Smyth Hall in an

instant. You are not likely to call me by that name because if you think I’m going to tell you that name, well, you’ve got another think coming. Not even wild horses would pull that name from my lips.

My point is, I wonder if this woman went by two names because everyone in the church felt connected to her.

This 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. To say “relationship” was something new. For 1,000 years, Jews were set apart from Gentiles. One way to define being Jewish was to say you were not Gentile. Their worlds were divided. They didn’t share meals; they didn’t share worship; they didn’t share food; they didn’t share language; they didn’t share religion. They were divided.

Now by the end of Acts, you discover the most amazing thing: In the church, this division is bridged. Jews and Gentiles become family. They worship together. They eat together. They learn to love one another. There were still issues, of course, but the division was broken down.

But before any of that happens, 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 break down these walls that had stood for generations and created community where only division had existed before? I think it was because she was kind.

When Peter came, 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. Kindness is a power.

This is a story about Peter, but I think Peter is summoned because he needed to see this: the power of kindness to bring people together; the power of kindness to build bridges; the power of kindness to create community. Because the church is called to create community, even in places it has not existed before. Peter needed to learn that from Tabitha.

This past week, Carol and I went with our kids to Scotland and Ireland. I had never been before. For part of our journey,

we took the train from Edinburgh to Oban, so that we might ferry over to the Isle of Iona. We had to change trains in Glasgow. There we were, four Americans trying to figure out the train station. An official there asked, “How can I help?”

“We need the train to Oban.”

“Oh, you have over an hour before your train. Why not go out and enjoy the city? Go through these gates.”

“But our ticket won’t let us back in.”

“No worries, mates, I’ll remember you. I’ll let you back in.”

It happened just that way. Nathan said, “Well, I can tell we are not in the subway of New York City.”

It was kindness. And the kindness extended to us made me feel, in a surprising way, that I was not completely an outsider. I was welcomed. I might even belong in this new country. Kindness is a power.

Why talk about this? Because sometimes faith and kindness don’t go together easily. Sometimes the faithful believe that they are called not to be kind, but to be pure; to remove themselves from the unrighteous, or remove the unrighteous from them.

On Monday, we walked through downtown Belfast with Paul. He is a historian and a mediator. He talked to us on a very personal level about the “troubles,” they call them — the violence between Catholics and Protestants (Presbyterians were very much a part of that struggle.) Religion was used to destroy community, under the guise of purity.

Of course, it happens here as well. This past week, there was a shooting in a synagogue, and we learned that the shooter, who is named John Earnest, is Presbyterian. Now he’s not of our denomination. He’s part of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, a conservative branch of the Presbyterian family that splintered out of our denomination in 1936. But don’t expect your neighbors to split that hair.

What has shocked many is that John Earnest entered that synagogue to kill Jewish people because he thought his faith taught him to do so.

In the wake of 9-11 and other acts of violence, many Muslim clerics stood up and said, “This violence is not Islam.”

It is our calling to do the same. There is nothing, absolutely nothing in Christian faith that supports any expression of white nationalism. There is nothing in Christian faith that supports racism. And there is actually nothing in Christian faith that supports nationalism itself. Christian faith is supposed to break down barriers and create community where none had existed before.

That’s why we know of this woman with two names. It is clear her kindness brought divided peoples together.

We were flying home on Tuesday. We landed in Philly and then boarded our next flight to Chicago. Storms were bad. Making a long story short, after being awake for 27 hours, and having multiple flights cancelled, we were stuck in Chicago for the night. We got a cab to a hotel. It

was the worst cab ride I have ever had. His defroster didn't work, so he kept a window down, which meant rain splashed on us in the back seat. In broken English, he asked me to use my phone for directions. His map program didn't work. It was 1:00 in the morning, and I was telling the cabbie, "Turn right at the next light."

I was not overly kind. I was not mean. I was just what my family calls "short." I said, "I'm not supposed to be telling you how to get there; you are supposed to get us there. That's your job."

When we got to our hotel, Carol, who is more kind than I, asked, "Tom, what do you think this guy's life is like? From his language, it was clear he hadn't been in the country long. His cab was in bad shape, and he was driving the midnight shift. If he is like some other immigrants I have known, I imagine he spent the day emptying trashcans at a nursing home or working a loading dock, and he is spending his night driving this broken-down cab. She said, "It looks like he is doing everything he can to make it, and he is barely holding on. Be kind."

I was ashamed. And I was grateful that he didn't know I was a pastor. This immigrant from somewhere in Africa, he very well may have been a Christian himself, but I did not treat him with kindness. There was a moment when I could have chosen to act like Christ and I didn't. And being sleep-deprived was no excuse.

The irony is, I already knew I wanted to talk with you about

Tabitha. I was already carrying this story with me. 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 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 ten 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."²

I think that is true. I also wonder if, in this divided, fractured, disrespectful culture of ours, I wonder if a consistent practice of kindness can work a miracle or two.

Tabitha 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 were angry at the cards life had dealt. Some were self-absorbed. But she didn't try to fix them; she just showed kindness.

So, here's what I think: I think we need that kind of miracle because we are divided in this country. We are being eaten alive by self-righteousness on the left and self-righteousness on the right. Not all of it is violent, but the arrogance and the dismissiveness of neighbor sows the seeds of violence, so we shouldn't be

surprised at the rise of white nationalism and the suspicion of the stranger that is in the air we breathe.

We need a miracle of healing. 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. It has happened before. That's why we know of this remarkable woman with two names, and we know of her because she was kind. So, I suggest a practice of kindness. Perhaps the risen Christ may just show up in the church again. And who knows, you might work a small miracle or two.

¹Willie James Jennings, *Acts Belief Commentary* (2017), p. 100

²Philip Simmons, *Learning to Fall* (2000), pp. 12–13

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>.