

WORKS OF GOD

SHERARD EDINGTON

Acts 9:36-42

When my daughter was born, a woman in our church presented her with a hand-made blanket. We were thrilled. This woman, named Ann, did many wonderful things for people, but one of the things that she did was to make blankets for the newborns in her life—church, family, and friends. The blankets were made from a simple flannel material to which Ann sewed a border that she had crocheted. This blanket protected our daughter until she outgrew it. The blanket now resides in a Ziploc bag in a drawer along with other items that we cherish.

Several years ago when Ann died I was asked to participate in her funeral. As part of my message I took the blanket and showed it and talked about it. Surprisingly, I was not the only person there with a blanket. Others also brought their Ann blankets to the funeral.

Our reading from the scripture for today is from the book *Acts of the Apostles*. And it tells us about a woman named Tabitha who made blankets.

The book *Acts of the Apostles*, or simply Acts as we call it, is the sequel to the Gospel According to Luke. Acts picks up where the Gospel leaves off—with Jesus' resurrection and his ascension into heaven. From there, Acts goes on to tell the story of how the church took hold in the world. It tells of the early apostles and missionaries. It tells of Peter and Paul. It tells of the successes and setbacks the early church experienced as the world came to know the story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Our reading for today is an odd little story about this woman named Tabitha. Her name in Hebrew means gazelle. In Greek, they called her Dorcas. Tabitha lived in the town of Joppa in Israel on the coast just north of Jerusalem. We know very little about her. What I can say for certain is that she was much loved and respected in her community. She is the only woman in Acts explicitly identified as a disciple. Luke even uses the feminine form of the noun—the only place in the New Testament where we see this. That alone should indicate how highly people thought of her.

The other nugget of information that Luke furnishes is that Tabitha *was devoted to good works and acts of charity*. Literally, the Greek says *full of good works*. I like to think of Tabitha as being like a lovely vase filled to the top with a dynamic compassion.

We know that among her good works and acts of charity was that she made clothes for people. Specifically, she made tunics and items of clothing for widows. In that culture, to be a widow was an extremely precarious position economically.

Unless a woman had wealth or family, she had no source of income. That is why the early part of the book of Acts describes the Christians establishing funds for widows. It was a crucial concern. For a any person, a sturdy tunic or cape or cloak was a multipurpose garment that could make the difference between life and death. Such an item would keep a person warm, protect them from the rain and sun, and serve as a blanket at night. Although it is not stated, it is implied that the items made by Tabitha were of exceptional quality—apparel to be prized. The clothes weren't just functional, they were fashionable and brought dignity to the wearer. That person could walk through town and look smart.

Tabitha made good clothes and gave them to those in need.

Tragically, Tabitha became ill and died, and her community mourned in anguish. Her friends took her body and washed it as a preparation for burial. However, instead of burying the body as quickly as possible, as was the Jewish custom, her friends laid her in a room upstairs—an upper room. Then, the community does something even more unusual. They send for the apostle Peter.

Remember, this is the early days of the Christian movement. Peter is recognized as the leader of the apostles in Jerusalem. According to Luke, Peter has been traveling and visiting various Christian communities. In the town of Lydda, just ten miles from Joppa, Peter healed a man who had been paralyzed for eight years. Word of this reaches Joppa. When Tabitha dies they send two men to bring Peter back to Joppa. It is not clear to me why they do this. Are they hoping for a miracle, a resurrection? Or do they just want Peter, as head of the church, to preside over the funeral for this woman they loved who was a crucial part of the Christian community. This community regards Tabitha so highly that they were willing to go to extraordinary lengths for her. The two men locate Peter and relay the request of the community, *Please come to us without delay*. Peter goes.

The two men lead Peter to the upstairs room where Tabitha is laid out. There, she is surrounded by *all the widows* who continue to weep. They crowd around Peter holding out for him the tunics and other items of clothing that Tabitha had made for them. They do so with tears and with pride—not unlike what I witnessed at Ann's funeral with the blankets.

When a person dies we often try to explain what they did in life, what kind of person they were. Our efforts are usually feeble and vague. "She was kind, gentle, thoughtful, always smiling"—that sort of thing. But the widows in Joppa have evidence for Peter. "See, this is what she did for me. She made this for me." Tabitha had sewn together a powerful legacy of love.

In the upper room, Peter sends everyone away and then he kneels down to pray. To be honest, I don't believe that Peter had a plan for what he was going to do here. He's never raised anyone from death before. He observed Jesus doing it, but I doubt

that he was taking notes for himself. I can't imagine how anxious Peter must be. Yes, he is the head of this group of followers of Jesus, but he's still new to it. Without warning, he's been thrown into this emotionally charged situation of pain and loss. Yes, he's healed two men so far, but they at least had a pulse. This woman is clearly deceased. The entire town is smothering him with their grief and their expectations. What is he to do? One wrong step and he could undermine the faith of an entire community. So Peter does what we should all do in difficult situations. He prays. He prays to God for guidance and understanding. I imagine he prayed for quite a while. It is only after he prays that he turns to the body and says, *Tabitha, arise*. And she does. He takes her by the hand and helps her up and then calls everyone in to see her. Luke tells us, *This became known throughout Joppa and many believed in the Lord*.

As I said, this is an odd story that raises a lot of questions. For me, the most significant question is why was Tabitha raised from the dead. She certainly didn't request it. Someone who selflessly devotes their lives to good works isn't the sort to ask to be brought back from death. It's not clear either that the people asked for it. I'm sure they secretly hoped for something like this, but miracles of that magnitude are too rare to imagine. So, why? Was this a reward for the good she had done in her life? I seriously doubt that this is the message scripture is offering us. It goes against the teaching of the gospel. We are not meant to be a people of works, but of faith. Tabitha wasn't trying to sew her way into heaven. Why was she raised?

I believe the answer is this: Tabitha's being raised is what we can expect in God's world. It is the new reality. Back in the early part of Luke's gospel, John the Baptist sends two of his disciples to Jesus with this question, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* John the Baptist represents the transition between the old to the new. John dressed like a prophet from the past and he announced the coming of the messiah. He called for the faithful to repent of their sins. He straddled the line between the past and the world to come. When Jesus hears this question from John's people, *Are you the one?* he responds, *Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them* (Luke 7:18-23).

This is the new reality with Christ. The kingdom of God is near. It is breaking into our world. We should expect to see miracles and healings. This is the world of Christ.

But, that doesn't answer the question of why Tabitha was raised. Why not someone else? Why not everyone? Certainly, Tabitha was a good person. However, her reward was not to enter the kingdom; Tabitha is the kingdom. What does the kingdom of God look like? It looks like Tabitha sewing cloaks and tunics for widows. It looks like Ann sewing blankets for infants. It looks like the hungry being fed, the poor being treated with dignity, the refugee being welcomed with compassion. It

looks like Jesus. It looks like those who in God's name live lives of service and love. They are like shooting stars in the night sky. They are glimpses into God's kingdom breaking into our world. In that kingdom is power—the power to heal, the power of miracles, the power to defy death.

May we too be so filled with good that we become the means by which others may clearly witness God's glorious kingdom and be changed. Amen.