



ENTRUSTED WITH LIFE AND WELL-BEING

May 12, 2019

Acts 9:36-43

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I had just moved here last year when the Met hosted its fashion Gala with the theme “Heavenly Bodies: Fashion and the Catholic Imagination.” I did not yet know enough to join the crowds outside for a glimpse of Rihanna dressed as a high-fashion Pope. And I was out of town this year when the event took place, so again missed the stars appearing in outrageous dress. Met Gala fashions are a long way from my mother’s Singer sewing machine or from Dorcas’ needle and thread tunics in Joppa.

Today, we live with extremes of many kinds—and clothing is among them. From high-end fashion runway designs to clothing so mass-produced it is designed to be expendable. I have marveled that my young-adult daughter prefers thrift stores to department stores, finding someone else’s throwaway to be her treasure. We buy and give away clothes at an unprecedented rate. We can hardly imagine today what Deane Turner describes in his history of The Brick Church: how most women’s and children’s clothes were made at home. How many people did not have enough money to pay even the *deposit* required before clothing manufacturers would hand out garments to sew at home. In response to this basic need, the women of The Brick Church established the Dorcas Society in the mid-1800s, providing clothes to people who were destitute. After the Civil War, that fledgling effort evolved into the Employment Society; a ministry helping women in need of work learn to sew. Women were employed to cut cloth and make garments they could sell at a minor profit. It provided the women a modest income and provided clothes to others at a reasonable cost. It was such an important ministry it continued well into the 1900s.ⁱ



Like some of you, I had grandmothers who sewed. And I often went with my mother to the fabric shop to choose among dress patterns and bolts of cloths. She made clothes for me from my toddler years to my teens. Then, in 8th grade, it was time for the torch to be passed. All girls were required to take Home Economics. We graduated from sewing a pillowcase to a stuffed animal. Our final project was to make a dress we would then model to our peers. I set about it: cutting cloth along the lines of the pinned paper pattern; feeding pieces of cloth through the school sewing machine. But my seams were never straight. My bobbin didn't bob. Each night, when I took the day's effort home, Mom would take out all of my stitches, showing me how to do it correctly as she guided it effortlessly through her machine. This went on for weeks. When the dress was finished, the only work that was truly mine were the darts. I turned in my navy-blue-with-tiny-red-and-yellow-flowers dress. I got a 98 on it. The teacher counted two points off for the darts.

Today's story in Acts goes into remarkable detail about a woman beloved in the church who was known for, among other things, the clothes she made for the widows—some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in society. The story begins, “Now in Joppa there was a disciple...” And in this verse, for the first and only time in the entire New Testament, the feminine form of “disciple” is used. Tabitha, or Dorcas, is indeed a model disciple for women and men alike. She is generous and kind—devoted to good works and acts of charity, ministering to the poorest and most marginalized people in town. Though women often remain unnamed in the Bible, we know this one by two names: ‘Tabitha,’ as she was called in in Aramaic, and in Greek translation, ‘Dorcas,’ which means, ‘gazelle.’ That we are told her name in two languages is significant—it tells us that Jewish people and Gentiles both knew and loved her and spoke her name. In this port city with its mix of cultures, much like our own country today, people who differed in race and religion, culture and language did not always get along. Prejudice and violence broke out. But this disciple of great heart welcomed both, ministered without reserve, bridging the divides in generosity of spirit and resources.

Her death constitutes a crisis in this community of believers. They can't imagine their life together without Tabitha Dorcas in it. No less than the Apostle Peter is



summoned to come at once from a nearby town. And here the story turns especially poignant. Washing a body after death was a common ritual, yet it is only here where this tender, intimate ritual is described in scripture: How the widows bathed her, placing her body in the upper room. Then these grieving widows show Peter, one after another, the tunics and clothing she had made for them. Each garment a witness to her generosity and kindness. Each piece of fabric added to another forming a story quilted of her devoted, faithful life.

But this story, so far steeped in loss and the smell of death, takes place among saints and widows who know and believe the Gospel. And so this story moves resolutely toward resurrection power. God's in Christ always moves from death to life, bringing well-being and newness—not only to a person but to whole the community of believers as well.

In Acts 9, this move from death to life is clear and unambiguous. It comes in the midst of the young church being built up and increasing, living its life in the peace and awe and comfort the Risen Lord. What had been told in the Gospel is now being made manifest in the church, too—God, in Christ, is transforming the world toward well-being and life. Here, Peter utters the same powerful imperative Jesus had uttered years earlier to Jairus' little daughter who had died. Jesus said, “Talitha, cum!”—Little girl, rise up! By Christ's power and authority, Peter now speaks in the Lord's name, saying, “Tabitha, rise up!” The move from death to life is clear and unambiguous. Dorcas opens her eyes and stands up. And if we push back further, to the Old Testament, we find the stories of Elijah and Elisha also uttering God's authoritative power to restore life and transform the world. Pushing back further still to Genesis, we find God has been at work moving from death to life from the beginning. When God said, “Let there be light!” God was at work turning the world of chaos and void into “fruit-bearing order.”

All of these divine utterances stitch together, leading to the faith the church itself must now inhabit—as the body of Christ in the world. The power of God to work newness and create well-being, to move from death to life in clear and unambiguous ways, was entrusted to particular people, then is entrusted to the



small but spreading community of believers in Joppa and Judea and Galilee and Samaria, and Corinth and Galatia and Thessalonica, Philippi, and Rome, and to us today. Surrounded as we are, too, by the smell of death, the church is given the authority and capacity and mission to speak God's commanding imperative: "Rise up!" Rise up to life; rise up to well-being; rise up to the newness God intends.ⁱⁱ

This story tells us that the church moves always from death to life, promotes well-being, and expects God's newness to be at work among us and beyond us. Peter does all of the talking and authoritative action here, but it is Dorcas who shows us how to be enact the power and capacity and mission of Christ "bodily, concretely and locally."ⁱⁱⁱ By her devotion to good works and acts of charity. By her tangible efforts to bridge racial and religious and cultural and language differences in the generosity of her resources and with the generosity of an open heart and mind and home. Make no mistake, the forces opposed to God's move from death to life, to well-being and newness, are every bit as determined, fierce, and imperial today as they were in Jerusalem and Rome and Joppa. But God's power is stronger still. We are called to proclaim and enact that power in our lives and in our life together, sometimes as dramatically as Peter did in Joppa.

But this story also gives the faith of Dorcas as a model of discipleship. It shows how small efforts and little kindnesses also have transformative power. Using the simplest of things, like thread and needle and cloth and tunics, God's power comes to life bringing dignity, well-being, newness, compassion, kindness, and companionship to others. Welcoming into her house as friends those who were enemies or estranged or afraid of one another, she enlarged everyone's capacity for wholeness and community. As she cared, bodily, concretely, and locally, for the widows, the most vulnerable in society found their needs met. And by her example, the saints themselves came closer to knowing what a saint looks like and does.

While there are many examples I could give of the saints I have come to know among you, today in honor of Dorcas, one especially comes to mind. Here at Brick there is a Prayer Shawl Ministry. Whenever they gather, experienced knitters sit



beside novice knitters. They share food and conversation and laughter and, yes, yarns, in homes or in the upper room on the church's third floor. As they knit, lone strings of yarn are woven together; a pattern emerges; a shawl or lap blanket comes to life. As fun as the fellowship is, the ministry and mission is the central calling. At the end of the night, they speak of those to whom each shawl or blanket will go, choosing the color and design and shape that might be most fitting. Then they gather around each piece, knitted with love and prayer, and take hold of an edge, then together a prayer is said. A blessing spoken. For the life and well-being of the one who will receive it. For comfort and companionship and peace and dignity or whatever else is needed to the one who receives it. The prayer shawl given to me when I arrived here was a gesture of hospitality, care and encouragement. It is in my office, a daily reminder of this community and God's desire for our well-being; the call to life and to witness that life before others.

We are living in a world where not only clothing is expendable, but so, it can seem, are children and young people in classrooms and on campuses; so are people of color at a traffic stop or a border crossing; so are the most vulnerable in society—many of whom still are women, and people who are homeless or cast aside. God has entrusted the transforming power and capacity and mission of Christ to the church. We are the ones who, in his name, reach out; confident of God's resurrection power. "Rise up!" we say, "Death does not get the last word." Rise up! God does not desire chaos, but light and well-being. Rise up, when the smell of death is present, especially then, because God is working newness and creating life in precisely those places.

I learned back in 8th grade that I am no Dorcas when it comes to making clothes for myself or anybody else. But saints, each of us has gifts to put to use faithfully and generously as the Body of Christ in the world. God asks us to use our gifts bodily, concretely and locally to care for the most vulnerable, to enlarge our welcome, and to refuse to let death have the last word. "Rise up!" we proclaim and ourselves must enact until even the saints themselves are astonished at the life God gives.

Amen.



ⁱ E. Deane Turner, *The Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York: A Fellowship of Kindred Minds*, Vol. II, p.338.

ⁱⁱ These insights are drawn from Walter Brueggemann's, "Theolog: Blogging toward Sunday" in *The Christian Century*, 4/24/2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brueggemann in "Blogging toward Sunday" noted above.