

Sermon Notes – May 8, 2022
“Always Doing Good & Helping the Poor”
(Acts 9:36-43)

Today, I decided not to preach on the lectionary out of the church year calendar, but to preach out of the book of Acts about Dorcas (or Tabitha), since this is Mother’s Day. I want to share a little bit about mothers and Mother’s Day, but I want to tell you a little more about Dorcas. But, before I do that, let me start with a story about Chuck Colson...

Years ago, Chuck Colson was a powerful attorney and a political advisor to the late President Richard Nixon. Nixon was impeached due to the Watergate Scandal and Chuck Colson also had to go to prison because of the Watergate Scandal. While Colson was in prison, he became a believer of Jesus Christ. When he got out, he went on to start an International Prison Fellowship Ministry. He did speaking engagements, wrote books, and he took the money from those things and used it for his prison ministry. In one of his books, he said, “Many people think that the point of life is to achieve money, power, pleasure, and position... but, we have it all wrong. As Christians, the point of life is the maturing of the soul. We reflect the maturing of the soul by how much we care for others, rather than ourselves.” Dorcas was one of those people who did that in the scriptures. She cared more about others, helped the poor, and was always doing good works. If you could write a nice epitaph for her graveside, it would say, “Always helping the poor and doing good works.”

There’s another man by the name of Henry Nouwen (who was a Catholic priest, a college professor, and theologian) who wrote a lot of books. Toward the end of his life, he worked with intellectually and developmentally disabled children and adults. In one of his books, he said, “We live our lives as human beings thinking that one day, as we face God, and he comes in his glory that he’s going to ask us one of these questions: ‘How much money did you earn during your life? How far did you progress in your career? How many friends did you make? How many people did you influence?’ -- If that were one of the questions that Jesus asks when he comes in his glory, most of us could stand at the

throne of grace with great confidence. But, I venture to say that the question Jesus asks will not be one of those, but probably one of those that we think is least important and we don't think about as much. Jesus may say, 'What did you do for the least of mine?'"

What would that look like today if Jesus asked you and me in the society and the culture in which we live? It might be that he asks us, "Did you stand up against hatred and prejudice? Did you stand up for the kid that was being bullied at school? Did you stand up for the adult being bullied in the workplace? Did you feed the hungry? Did you clothe the naked? Did you visit the sick? Did you help the oppressed?"

Dorcas was a woman who had great compassion, kindness, generosity, and was concerned about other people. The scripture said that she cared for the widows in her day. Now, what you need to understand is that widows, women, and children in that day were at the bottom of the social/economic ladder. They were a piece of property. They had no rights. They were just an object. In those days, if a woman lost her husband and he did not have a brother who could marry her, she was to go home to her father. If her father was not living, she would be at the mercy and help of others. She may have to go on the streets and beg for food. She may have to prostitute herself out to get enough money for food and clothing for herself and her kids. Being a widow was not a good situation in which to find yourself in that day and time.

Tabitha (or Dorcas) was a woman of financial means because she made clothes for others in need. She took her cloth and her sewing skills and made clothing for women and children who needed it - who were poor and especially widows. It said that when she died, all these people showed up at her house. You know how that is today - at a funeral service, we might have a DVD of somebody, videos, scrapbooks, pictures to show of those people and things they've done. In those days, they didn't have all that. But, what they did have was their memories - their verbal sharing - and the clothing that Dorcas had made. Can't you imagine that Tabitha (Dorcas) was one of those women that you went to her house with a pretty outfit on and some woman would come in and

say, “That looks gorgeous on you! That is so beautiful!” Tabitha was the kind of woman who would have gone in the other room and changed her clothing. She’d put on something else, bring it back out, and say, “Here. You try it on - and “You take it home. It looks good on you!” Tabitha was one who was generous and compassionate. She was giving. She used her sewing skills and her financial resources to help those in need. And, she was remembered for that.

Now, the interesting thing is, we don’t know much about Dorcas or Tabitha in the Bible. The only time we know about her is in this story in Acts -- that she was a woman who was always doing good acts and helping the poor. Peter comes to visit her. We really don’t know why they got Peter... were they getting him to preach her funeral service or were they hoping he would heal her and raise her from the dead? We don’t really know. But, it says that when he got there, he went into her room and he sent everybody out - kind of like Jesus did when he raised Jairus’ daughter from the dead. You remember Jairus was a Synagogue ruler whose 12-year-old daughter was very sick. He beckoned for Jesus to come and heal her. On the way, the servants came and said, “She’s already died. You don’t need to bother the Master.” But, Jesus said to Jairus, “Have faith. Just believe, Jarius.” Jesus went on to the home and sent all the mourners out, except her mom and dad, and his three closest disciples (Simon Peter, James, and John). Then, Jesus went in and prayed. He said, “Daughter, get up.” She was raised into new life. Peter did the same thing when he went into the room with Tabitha (or Dorcas). He sent everyone out, bent down to pray, and then he looked at her and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Evidently in his prayer time, God had told Peter that it wasn’t her time to die just yet and she was raised to new life. She was enabled to go back to the ministry of blessing other people.

You know, God has called us to bless other people. There are a lot of women in this church who do that in many different ways - not only being a biological mother, but you bless other people. There’s a woman in this church who is always giving to other people. She takes them to the doctor, the hospital; she takes food to them; she’s always doing things for them. There’s another woman in this church who’s always

crocheting or knitting something for people. It doesn't matter if it's someone in the nursing home, our sick and homebound members, our high school and college graduates, or a newborn baby - she's always doing crocheting or knitting for other people - donating her resources, her threads, and giving of her time and talents to do it.

There's a lady that many of you in this church knew, who lived years ago. I didn't know her, but her name was Vera Wagoner. She was married and had no children. When she died, she left money to this church - the Vera Wagoner International Mission Fund. I don't know if it was a million or two million dollars. She left the money so that the interest from that money could be used for international missions. I want you to know that this church gives \$30,000-\$40,000 a year in international missions because of that fund. In fact, recently you were told that we gave \$10,000 to humanitarian efforts in Ukraine from that fund. That was in addition to the \$35,000 that we'd already given this year. It was because of that lady and her concern for missions. She wanted people to know Jesus Christ's love; she wanted places for women to learn how to earn a living; she wanted people to teach others how to dig wells and have fresh water. She wanted to support missionaries who were telling others about Jesus Christ. And so, that fund is there through this church. She left a legacy of funds and generosity to support missions.

I never knew my Grandmother Stout because she died when my father was young. About 15 or 20 years ago, one of my older aunts told me that my Grandmother Stout was the kind of woman (with all her ten kids) that if there was a crisis in the community and a death in the family, my Grandmother Stout would've been the first one at that house to take their kids home with her. She would take food to that house and then she would take their kids and keep them for three or four days. Can you imagine that many kids in your house?? Man... I'd be ready to pull my hair out. But, she would take those kids, feed them, and clothe them and see that they went to school while their parents were taking care of funeral arrangements. My grandmother cared about others in crisis and always did something practical to help out.

Some of you know that I've talked about Memaw Foster. When I was 24-years old, I worked in their UCC church in Henderson, North Carolina. I got to know their sons through the youth group and they became like younger, adopted brothers to me. Memaw became a mother because my mother died when I was 12-years-old and I don't remember a lot about her. But, Memaw Foster became that adoptive mom to me. One of the things that she always did - (and her husband and sons would always get on to her about) - was always helping somebody else. "Mom, there you go... helping somebody else again." She was always trying to help somebody who was in need. She was always trying to help somebody get back on their feet - whether it was taking them to the grocery store, doctor's office, helping to balance a budget, etc. She was always doing something for somebody in the community who was in need. She left a legacy behind her of caring for someone in need.

I wonder what kind of legacy you and I will leave behind for others? ... Not just to be said that you were a good mom or a good dad, you worked hard, or whatever... but what kind of spiritual legacy are we leaving behind? When Jesus asks us one day, when he comes in his glory, "What have you done for the least of these?" ... What will we say? How would that look today? ***How can you and I (like Dorcas) bring healing and hope to the world in which we live?*** What would that look like? ... Maybe standing up against hatred and prejudice; maybe standing up for the person being bullied; maybe feeding the hungry; maybe clothing those who need it.

Years ago, I had the special privilege to work with some teenagers at First Baptist, Concord. There were 7 kids in a youth discipleship class that I taught on Tuesday nights - 4 boys and 3 girls. Those three girls were all popular teens and cheerleaders at the high school. They were interested in growing in their Christian walk and being leaders in the youth group. One night, I suggested to them that we do a scavenger hunt and collect food for the needy in the community. We did. We called social services and found that there was a family in the community that needed food and Christmas presents. As a group that Christmas, we collected food and wrapped gifts for this family. I took the three girls to the home to

deliver those gifts. When we got there that night, the girls were surprised because the oldest child was one that their friends bullied at school. She couldn't dress like the other kids, and she wasn't quite as smart as some of the other kids, so they made fun of her at school. We took the gifts and food inside and hugged those kids that night. When the three girls came back to my car, they cried. "Miss Peggy, we've been among those who bully kids like that and I'm so sorry. I never knew they had to live like that." The dad was out of work; the mother was disabled and had to stay at home. One of the children had only one leg and was waiting to have more surgery. The one girl (they knew from school) was developmentally disabled. They cried and said, "Miss Peggy, we don't ever want to do that again." I want you to know that those three girls made a pact with me and with their moms to take those kids some of their own clothes. "We'll make sure our friends don't pick on her as much as we can." This experience changed them. Do you know that one of those young girls is now a Youth Minister serving in a church?

You see... what would it look like for us to leave a legacy of doing good and helping the least among us? God calls us as mothers and fathers, men and women, to make a difference for the kingdom of God. May we do that this year. Amen.