

Acts 9: 36-43 “Called to be Alive” Rev. Janet Chapman 11/3/19

The video went viral, 8 million views and counting – Dracula, a symbol of fear and death, did something out of character for the undead. It was an act of generosity performed so kids who came after him to that bowl of blessing wouldn't be sad. Had this been a girl, the author of our scripture might have renamed this youngster Dorcas, for he was acting much more like a Dorcas than a Dracula. Dorcas is the Greek name for the disciple we meet in our story, also known as Tabitha which means gazelle in Aramaic, a graceful and lovely antelope. The fact that we are told both her names may indicate that she was widely known in both Gentile and Hebrew circles. In this male dominated fellowship, Luke introduces us to Dorcas/Tabitha/Gazelle, the only person in the New Testament specifically designated as a female disciple. For those who claim that women can't be leaders in the church because it isn't biblical, apparently they forgot to inform Luke. Other than her ministry status, we know very little about Tabitha except that she was devoted to good works and acts of charity, devoted to generosity. This has been the theme which has guided our thoughts in preparation for committing ourselves to God with regards to our generosity for the upcoming year.

Tabitha's story leads us into a whole new understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus'. As a disciple, she ministers to the neediest around her while confronting the prevailing patriarchal system which undermines the ministry of women, which tells girls you can't do this because you are a girl. Will Willimon points out that in Luke's version of this new emerging community, “no one stays in his or her place. Common fishermen are preaching to temple authorities, paralyzed old men are up walking about and changing lives, and a woman called Gazelle heads a church ministry among the poor at Joppa.” She serves the widows, the

poorest of the poor since they had no breadwinner in the family, making for them tunics and articles of clothing. In her work, Tabitha builds a new configuration of power in which God uses what is lowly and despised by the world to bring down what is mighty and powerful. Because of her good works, she becomes the matriarch of that early church and a pillar in her society. She lives in order to give to others and subsequently gives in order to fully live. Until she grows sick. We have all seen it before. We shake our fists in the air – why her, why him? They are among the good ones..., but as in Billy Joel’s song, only the good die young. Tabitha is not plagued with a long-term illness – she dies rather quickly. Her discipleship doesn’t prevent her from human frailties and vulnerability, nor will it for future disciples, no matter how grand their devotion to generosity. The mourners surround her body, not the professional mourners, called in to weep over the loss of a stranger. These are genuinely heartbroken friends crying over the loss of a beloved friend, a saintly and charitable leader. Dorcas’ death not only elicited the sorrow of the widows she had served, but it also heightened their sense of insecurity. Her obituary indicates to us that she was a physical and tangible sign of God’s love for the poor and without her visible presence, nothing seemed certain. It was sort of like the little boy who found a quarter in the driveway as the family left for church. He was so excited to give it to Jesus when he got to church. When they returned home, he pulled it out of his pocket and handed it to his mother. “You can have this money, Mommy. I was going to give it to Jesus, but he wasn’t there.”

Dorcas reassured those still young in their faith that Christ was present in their midst and could be trusted, even when their bowl of blessing had been emptied. At her death, the disciples call for Peter who is down the road to come right away. We don’t know what they

were hoping for or what they expected. Did they want Peter to know about this extraordinary believer, showing him the beautiful clothing she had made for them? Did they wish for the memory of their dear friend to be shared with the burgeoning faith community? Did they hope for a miracle, having heard of such things from afar? What is it we hope for in the honoring of a loved one? Is it that their name won't be forgotten, that their legacy will carry on, that someone else will come to understand why it is that we loved them so much? Tabitha's friends felt compelled to witness to her generosity, to not let it end with her death. Her faithful following of Jesus' call to invest one's self in acts of charity and good works becomes a depiction of what it means to be alive. Her devotion in life becomes a testimony to God's power over death, so Peter prays and commands her, "Tabitha, get up!" Wake up, rise up, he says, and with that, we are connected to every other biblical story where life overcomes death. Peter helps her up, invites the witnesses in, and shows her to be alive. She is woke and so are those around her. Their fears are doused by a living witness to God's love. The text tells us "Many believed in the Lord," but that belief doesn't emerge from some dazzling display of power. If it did, the text would talk about the amazement, sheer wonder, and complete astonishment of the witnesses. Instead, it simply says Tabitha's story became known and many believed; they believed because of the hope and trust exhibited by the characters in the story; they believed because of what it meant for them personally and for the world. Tabitha's generosity in sharing her gifts and the difference that made in the lives of those around her overshadowed the fears of her loved ones. Her legacy made it possible for her friends to envision a new realm where death would no longer have the final say, where sickness would no longer be a sign of punishment or a barrier between good and evil, where we can all dare to

hope that the ills that plague us, our families, and our communities might also be healed by a God who cares so deeply for our well-being. Tabitha had heard the call to wake up, to be alive, way before she died, which challenges us in the church to do the same. The rising of Tabitha brings with it the rising of hope and new life not only for the oppressed and poor of her community, but for anyone in any time who has experienced poverty, who knows what it is to be isolated, alienated, beaten down, cast out by life or society or family. It is renewed hope for those deemed by society as hopeless.

Eugene Peterson in his book, "Run With the Horses," writes about seeing a family of birds teaching the young to fly. Three young swallows were perched on a dead branch that stretched over a lake. "One adult swallow got alongside the chicks and started shoving them out toward the end of the branch – prodding and pushing until the end one fell off. Somewhere between the branch and the water 4 feet below, the wings started working, and the fledgling was off on his own. Then the second one. But the third one was not to be pushed around. At the last possible moment, his grip on the branch loosened just enough so that he swung downward, then tightened again with bulldog tenacity. The parent was unsentimental. She pecked at the desperately clinging talons until it was more painful for the poor chick to hang on than risk the insecurities of flying. The grip was released, and the inexperienced wings began pumping. The mature swallow knew what the chick did not – that it would fly – there was no danger in making the chick do what it was perfectly designed to do...You see, birds have feet and can walk; birds have talons and can grasp a branch securely. But flying is their characteristic action, and not until they fly are they living at their best, gracefully and beautifully. Giving is what we do best. It is the air into which we were born. (Tabitha

understood and lived that.) Giving is within our character, the action that was designed into us before our very birth...Some of us try desperately to hold on to ourselves, to live for ourselves. We look so bedraggled and pathetic doing it, hanging on to the dead branch of a bank account for dear life, afraid to risk ourselves on the untried wings of giving. We don't think we can live generously because we have never tried. We are frightened of falling and don't trust the unknown below. So we hang on for dear life, forgetting the truth of Dorcas, and that little Dracula, that when we are devoted to generosity, so much life, hope, and joy is given back that our bowl of blessings overflows. The sooner we start in trying out those wings of giving, the better. For we are all going to have to give up our lives someday, and the longer we wait to take off from that branch, the less time we have to enjoy the soaring and swooping life of grace.

Amen.