

**Acts 9: 36-43 “How Do You Measure a Life?” Rev. Janet Chapman 5/11/25**

If you are a Broadway fan, you might recognize the title of today's message from the opening song “Seasons of Love” in the musical Rent. It is one of my favorite musicals because it invites us to look at the power of relationships in our life. In the musical, the song was written for the funeral of one of the main characters who dies from AIDS but it is more about life than death. In fact, one lyric says “It's time now to sing out, tho' the story never ends. Let's celebrate, remember a year in the life of friends.” We are reminded that in any year of our lifetime, we are given 525,600 minutes to live on this earth. So how do we spend those minutes and what's the connection, as the song goes, with “How do you measure the life of a woman or man?... In truths that she learned, or in times that he cried, in bridges he burned, or the way that she died.” This 1996 musical could have been written for so many people we have known, people who have lived good lives and left their eternal mark on our hearts... mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, children, spouses, friends who were more like family than our own families.

It could have been written for the woman in our scripture today, Tabitha, whose life was measured according to her many good works. Come with me to ancient Tel Aviv, or Joppa, to the first resurrection story after Christ's resurrection. Our sister Tabitha, whose Greek name is Dorcas meaning “gazelle,” was a single, independent woman in a society where women were property. The role of the average woman was as an appendage to men, supported by fathers, brothers or husbands. Her dual names likely meant she was a cultural hybrid of sorts, straddling the line between Judaism and the wider Greco-Roman world. She was at home both in the comfortable confines of her faith but also in the different cultures that surrounded her. It is significant to note that Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament directly referred to as a disciple. For the author Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, a disciple is a person, male or female, who follows Jesus out of the waters of baptism into a life of healing, reconciliation, love, and confrontation with those holding religious and political power. Tabitha does all that with emphasis upon caring for the neediest around her.

Will Willimon writes that in this new community of Jesus followers, “No one stays in his or her place. Common fishermen are preaching to the temple authorities, paralyzed old men are up and walking about and changing lives, and a woman called Gazelle heads a welfare program among the poor at Joppa. In her work, Tabitha is busy creating a new configuration of power in which God uses what is lowly and despised in the world to bring down the things that are mistakenly glorified.” As the story begins, she is still very much alive, probably a widow or householder, a woman of means and resources which she used to help others. This may have been one of the reasons for the widows’ profound grief at her death. Without her good works and acts of charity, the widows, which could mean any woman who didn’t have male support, would be left destitute. Tabitha may have been a mom as well, who modelled the characteristics of many maternal figures we know. Just mentioning her selfless and giving love may invite us to remember maternal figures of our past. It’s like the story of the wife who drove her husband’s car to the shopping mall and noticed that the windshield and headlights were dirty. She took the time to scrub them down before returning the car. Once home, she called out, “The woman who loves you the most in the whole world just cleaned your headlights and windshield.” Her husband looked up and said, “Mom’s here?”

When Tabitha dies, the scripture makes it sound like it was sudden and unexpected; an illness that quickly overtook her body and she was gone. Members of her community rally to honor this maternal pillar of the church, sending two men to get the revered Peter to come as soon as he can. As he arrives, hope seems to rise up in the group as they name all the good works for which Tabitha is responsible; they tell beloved stories of her life. This is how it goes, isn’t it, in our process of grieving, in the memorial services we have attended in our lives? I imagine many were wearing the tunics and clothing she had made in her honor. Perhaps these clothes were created for the sake of those who lacked them. The narrative doesn’t say so, yet it is what her friends cling to desperately. It was a tribute to this female disciple; a living fashion show, maybe not as elaborate as last week’s Met Gala but certainly as significant in

that community. It was the fashion show of her life, the work of her hands walking around on the bodies of her friends while stories are told of Tabitha's love, compassion, and abundant generosity. They were showing her off by showing off her handiwork. These friends have reason to hope that death won't have the final word as Luke makes a point to echo previous stories of God's sustenance and grace. Jesus himself brings breath back to the dead in the raising of a widow's son and Peter uses the very same words, "arise, get up" in his encounter with the dead. In the Hebrew scriptures, both Elijah and Elisha pray for God to bring the dead back to life and thus, Peter stands in a long line of prophets who work signs and wonders among the people. For those of us who have great difficulties imagining the shattering of the laws of physics in order to accept the power of resurrection, it is important to expand our understanding of life beyond death as Christ did and as God taught. There is a long literary legacy of resurrection power in the Bible. This resurrection isn't solely focused on the miraculous resuscitation of a corpse as much as it is the reactivation of life and redefinition of life beyond death. That sort of power is seen in prophets, in Jesus, in Peter and in countless other agents throughout history. Whenever the power of death is overcome by the power of resurrected life, we see the power of God alive in God's world. Such power is still witnessed today through the lives of people like Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela, Oscar Romero, maybe even in Pope Francis, and, I trust in countless other persons whose names we shall never know. Frederick Buechner wrote, "All the death there is in the world, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup." A life lived in God is a life where death has no final influence, and Tabitha's life was just one example of that. This doesn't negate the fact that Tabitha does die at some point, but in the power of resurrected lives like you and I are offered, death isn't the end.

Some of you know that my mother is near 99 years old and I will head up I-5 this afternoon to be with her because I never know when it will be our last holiday together. My mom has been my best friend and one of the greatest teachers of my life. Growing up in a pastor's family, I thought it was normal to go to church every Sunday, have pot roast for Sunday's big meal, and for Dad to head out in the middle of

the night to be with church people in crisis. I remember going to funerals at a young age where the casket was open and the deceased lay silent in the finest garb. It was my Grandma Warner, also a pastor's wife, who once brought me to a funeral of her close friend and she took my hand and hers and placed them on the dead body, saying a prayer as she did. I remember the body being cold and hard and Grandma telling me that her friend was no longer there, it's just a shell. Recently I read of another Grandma who used to teach her grandchildren the same thing saying, "This is just an old house and our friend has moved on. There's no reason to be afraid of an old house." That's the kind of lesson that takes root and helps shed any lasting fear of death. The story went on to say how this Grandma had made an unusual request as she drew near to death. As the family gathered around her bed, fighting back tears, she asked, "Please don't bring any flowers to my grave because I won't be there. When I get rid of this body, I'm flying to Europe because your Granddad would never take me." The room erupted in laughter and there were no more tears. Early in the morning, the family got the call that she had begun her flight to Europe. Several days later, they were sorting her personal belongings and came across a poem this beloved woman had written called "The Legacy." It said, "When I die, give what is left of me to children. If you need to cry, cry for your siblings walking beside you. Put your arms around others and give them what you need to give to me. I want to leave you with something, something better than words, sounds, or things. Look for me in the people I have known and loved. And if you cannot live without me, then let me live on in your eyes, your mind, and your acts of kindness. You can love me most by letting hands touch hands and letting go of children that need to be free. Love does not die, people do. So when all that is left of me is love...give me away." This is a story of resurrection power and hope that still rings true today. As in Tabitha's day, such love needs a witness and to be shared. She took her wealth, acts of charity, and prophetic speech and used it to benefit the less privileged. Tabitha's life speaks to a world characterized by death, illness, and loss, and declares that eternal life is the new order of the day and that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.