

Acts 9:36 -43 Tabitha on Mother's Day, 2019

During this last Synod Assembly, our Bishop Tom Aitkin began a sermon by sharing a sweet story about his Mom that is certainly appropriate to Mother's Day, as well as to our lesson from Acts 9. Bishop Tom grew up in Minneapolis in the 1960s, in an era when his neighborhood was a safe place and his Mom, like most, was at home. He attended a school a few blocks from his home. Becoming a kindergartner and attending school, was of course, a big deal to him as a child and actually a little fearsome—which you'd never guess, if you know our bold and gregarious Bishop as an adult. But, as he ventured out from his home into this greater world as a shy youngster, he had a source of reassurance—every day his Mom walked him to and from his school, holding his hand. She walked him there in the morning, and then she returned for him when Kindergarten was over a few hours later. Yet, the next year, as he began first grade, his Mom explained that it was time he learned to make this walk to and from school by himself, as a part of growing up. He was initially terrified, but she eased his fears by walking the first week with him for part of the first block and waiting to meet him in the same spot on his way home. Eventually, she stood and watched from the end of their driveway, then the front steps, and finally, he said goodbye to her at the door. She had eased him into this particular task of growing up with the care and sensitivity of a loving Mom, just exactly the kind of thing so many Moms do all the time. Certainly this was a simple, ordinary series of small acts of caring on her part; nothing earth-shaking or news-worthy about any of this humble story; yet it left a deep impression on her son of kindness and assurance that lives within him to this day, as he still recalls it. Isn't it exactly these small acts of love and keeping faith that come together to shape our lives as children and as adults, as individuals and as communities? Aren't these the kind of

actions that, when taken, make all the difference? And when these kind of actions are neglected, doesn't their absence contribute to a much colder, more hostile and fearful world? Small actions of goodness can produce big results. I have always loved JRR Tolkien's character, Gandalf, who shows up in *The Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Gandalf has a marvelous quote where he states, "Some believe it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I have found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay... small acts of kindness and love." I believe we could all attest to the truth of that statement, as our Bishop did with his example of his Mom; likely many of us could recall similar acts of love and kindness from our own Moms, as well as Dads, also. Most of us are aware of how all of those small actions of caring done with consistence and persistence contributed to shaping us into who we have become. They make a huge difference cumulatively. And our lesson from Acts this morning is certainly proof of the power and significance of small actions of love and faith.

When we read this lesson, it's natural to focus on the miracle of healing and life in the story and on the person of Peter. Both are worthy focal points. This miracle of bringing life from death is God's signature style, evidenced in the Easter event just a few weeks ago; we have a God who can raise the dead to life, and only God can do so. When you live in a place where it snows in May, it's heartening to claim faith in a God who brings life out of death and creates spring even out of a North Shore winter. That is the God we claim and celebrate! That's inspiring! And Peter, acting as God's agent in this story, is also an inspiration to us. Particularly if we recall his back story and trace the growth of his faith and love. We know Peter as a leader among the 12 disciples and one of Christ's closest friends. We know him as possessing both

great strengths and weaknesses---he gets out of the boat on the stormy seas to walk to Jesus, but then takes his eyes off of his Lord and sinks like a rock. He is the first to confess Jesus as Christ, but he denies him three times on the night of his arrest. Last Sunday, we saw Jesus make amends for Peter's betrayal, asking Peter to affirm his love for Him three times, once for each of Peter's three betrayals. But here in Acts, we see that Peter has, over some years now, matured in his love and his faith; it would seem that he has learned to get out of his own way and out of the Spirit's way, in order to fully express the love of God for others. Through Peter's actions, God brings new life to this woman and this community, and that probably wouldn't have been within Peter's capabilities earlier on in his walk of faith. It is most encouraging for us to realize that regardless of our age, we can and do continue to grow in faith and love, just like Peter.

But this morning, in honor of Mother's Day and just for a change of pace, I'd like us to switch our focus from the miracle and Peter over to Tabitha, the recipient of this miracle of healing and life. What do we know about Tabitha? In truth, not a great deal, but what there is, is helpful. Tabitha was a part of an early Christian community founded by the apostle Philip, and she was herself a follower of Jesus who took to heart his message of care for those marginalized or in need. We know this because we are told that at her death, a community of widows she assisted were grieving deeply. Widows most definitely lived on the margins in ancient societies, where a woman's well-being was entirely dependent upon a relationship with a man---a husband, a father, a brother, a son. Opportunities for a woman to support herself without such a man in her life were simply not there. Very easily, widows fell into poverty or were forced into servitude, prostitution or begging. Tabitha cared about these women who were easily overlooked and forgotten in her world. Clearly she shared Jesus's concern for those in need or peril. She

couldn't change the status of widows in the ancient world, but she instead did what she could--- she sewed them clothes and helped provide warmth and shelter for them. She used the gifts she had and the resources she had to make a difference for others who might otherwise have been neglected. Small acts of kindness, for sure, but just the sort of small acts of love and faithfulness that make all the difference.

For a different insight on Tabitha, I turn to a book that Randi Alreck used for Lenten study this year. Every week throughout Lent, a group of thinkers gathered and considered Biblical stories through a different cultural lens than our normal white, middle class perspective; we discovered instead the perspective of Latin Americans. Randi used a book entitled "Hermanas", written by three female Latin American Biblical scholars, and one of the chapters of the book focused on Tabitha. Looking at her story through their cultural lens brought something about this story to my attention that I'd never given any thought to previously. Those living in a minority culture tend to be more aware of how others bridge differences between cultures than someone like I might be when I live in the predominant culture. That was true in the author's understanding of Tabitha. The author noted that Tabitha was a Christian woman who bridged diverse cultures. How do we know this? Because of her double names, which I had never even noticed.

But consider this--- Tabitha lived in Joppa, along the coast of ancient Palestine, where both Jews and Gentiles, probably Greek sailors, lived. Jews and Gentiles did not mix well, as so many of our Gospel stories attest. And Jesus was one who continually crossed over that boundary, going out of his way to perform healings for those who were Gentiles, not Jewish, and

to tell stories featuring non-Jewish heroes, like the Good Samaritan for example. Following in her Lord's footsteps, Tabitha also found a way to form relationships within both Jewish and Gentile communities in Joppa. And we know this how? Again, her double names. The author of our text from Acts, Luke, finds it necessary to tell us two times that this faithful woman was known by two names-- Tabitha within her Jewish community and Dorcas within the Greek community. Why would that even be mentioned, if she wasn't a person who had found a way to befriend others in each of those communities? Luke wants it to be clear that he is speaking about that woman who sewed clothes for widows—you Jews knew her as Tabitha, you Gentiles knew her as Dorcas. But both of you communities, Jews and Gentiles, knew of her. That's remarkable, if you recognize what it means. In a place and time where Gentile Greeks and Jews were sharply polarized, her ability to be a part of both communities was commendable, indeed. Again, we don't often think about simply befriending those different from us as being anything terribly significant or earthshaking, but in truth it is another of those building blocks, another of those small acts of love and faithfulness by which we are a part of bringing God's kingdom into reality. Tabitha, by befriending both Jews and Gentiles, provided a witness to Jesus that went much farther than it otherwise would have, and she was a blessing to an unexpectedly wide and diverse assortment of people. Just as Jesus was.

So the good news for us this morning is that, in Tabitha, we have a model of discipleship that is within our grasp. We may not be confident in our ability to raise the dead, but we can sew clothes for those in need, or do the equivalent. We can perform those small acts of love that build up other people and our community. We can befriend the unlikely person, building a bridge where there was formerly just a chasm. We can do those things. And by doing so, we are

following Christ's example and making a difference, far more than we probably realize. Sometimes we might wonder if we are making a difference at all, and if we shouldn't be somehow doing bigger, grander things for God and the world than we are. Realistically, discipleship isn't like that very often. It's more like doing what we do every day, because God calls us to do it; but doing it in love and with faithfulness, as if for Christ Himself. Helen Keller once wrote, "I long to accomplish a great a noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble." Small tasks like washing our grandchildren's dirty feet or massaging the tired and aching feet of our spouse. Small tasks like emptying the recycling or driving a neighbor to the grocery store. Humble actions like teaching Children's Church or cutting squares for quilts or making pancakes for Palm Sunday breakfast or attending a council meeting or serving as a communion assistant or assembling the newsletter or changing the light bulbs in the ceiling lights. Small tasks like being the patient and caring Mom, or Dad, who helps a child gain confidence by teaching them to walk by themselves to school. And again, this is encouraging to us, because such tasks are within our scope. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's needs and troubles, and to feel ourselves woefully inadequate to the task of responding in any faithful, Christian way at all. But all of our small acts of love and faith, directed and energized by the Spirit of God, can and do change the world.

A popular Christian author, Rachel Held Evans, died this past week. I wasn't very familiar with her work, but after her death, some of her wise words began popping up in memes on Facebook. I think these words speak profoundly to our need to not be overwhelmed, but rather to simply do what we are blessed to do, where and as we are. In encouraging Christians to act, she wrote, "You have everything you need. You have the sacraments. You have the call. You

have the Holy Spirit. You have one another. You have a God who knows the way out of the grave. You have everything you need. You just need to show up and be faithful.” And that we can do!

We know we can do that, because our small to medium sized congregation, through many small and faithful gifts and acts of generosity, won the Synod’s Holy Cow Award, as in “Holy Cow! Look what we did for World Hunger!” We came in first in per capita giving to world hunger out of 132 congregations in our synod. Holy Cow, indeed! Most of those gifts were given through the God’s Barnyard program, our Children’s Church mission program that our entire congregation has so enthusiastically embraced. Gifts range from large gifts of wells to a quarter brought by a child that eventually went towards purchasing a chick, but that’s not important. What’s important is that so many of us gave as we were blessed and inspired to give, and in doing so, our small acts of love and faithfulness made a world of difference to people in developing nations we will never know, but God knows them and loves them and rejoices in our care for these neighbors we’ve never met. We have everything we need to act on God’s behalf. We can be a part of God’s work through our small acts of caring, befriending, helping, and loving. Through people just like us and through actions just like ours, God is changing and renewing the world. Amen.