

“Maneuvering the Edges”

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Psalm 30

Acts 9.36-43

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For centuries women have been disciples, ministering with community and fighting for justice. Women have been ordained as ruling elders since 1930 and Ministers of the Word and Sacrament in the PCUSA since 1956. Not all denominations acknowledge women in ministry, but whether ordained or not, women have been active in ministry since early times. Women have not been protected and so we protect ourselves. Scripture looks after widows as there are many passages that emphasize sharing crops and resources with people on the margins but I do not think that it has always been executed in the world.

Today we read about Tabitha, a woman who was not only a disciple, but also a woman who had a ministry working with other widows. Living in Joppa, Tabitha was revered by her community. The scripture tells us that there was a special disciple in Joppa – not just a special disciple but the literal Greek reads a “certain female disciple.” Acts 9 is the only place that the word for “female disciple” is used. At the same time, we are told that this woman was a “*certain* female disciple,” inferring that there were other female disciples.¹ Apparently this was not as uncommon as some might assume.

Tabitha’s name in Greek is Dorcas, which translates to the word “gazelle.”² Now, the only time I have seen gazelles close up was when I was in a really mountainous area that was full of sharp, jagged rocks. It was a pretty treacherous sight with very little soft grass to cushion them. Even though the territory they live in is extremely rough, they are some of the most graceful creatures, which seems fitting for Tabitha’s name.

As we read on we find out that Tabitha is known for her charity to the widows. She may have had other ministries but in this particular passage the widows are the ones who surround her when she dies. In verse thirty-seven, however, we are told that “they had washed her and they laid her in a room upstairs” after she had died. We know she was well loved because the widows surround her, weeping, and showing Paul the tunics that Tabitha made for them. Tabitha is working with people who probably were outcasts in society.³ She is known for caring for people in a time of distress. Like a gazelle, Tabitha is graceful in a place and time when chaos and difficulty surround her.

The tunics are important, I think. Widows were not cared for in this time because women were dependent on men for their food and shelter and clothing. If a woman’s husband died she relied on her son, if she had a son. If she was childless and without a spouse, she was unable to

¹ Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 34.

² Frederick William Danker, ed. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, third edition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 258.

³ V. George Shellington, *An Introduction to the Study of Luke-Acts*. (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 45.

get a job and earn money. So women like Tabitha often created these communities. She gave them clothes to wear. This would be like the Clothes Closet in town – community women gathering together to help clothe and support other women in the community. Tabitha was invested in the community, but especially the women in the community. She saw them as humans, as friends, as colleagues.

I have met many women throughout my life that remind me of Tabitha. I think of Barb, who was a single mother raising four children. When women in domestic violence situations came to her seeking safety, she often welcomed them into her home, connected them to resources, and encouraged them.

I think about Karla who ministered with women in jail. I think of June who helped women in Thailand who were being trafficked. She would meet them where they were and help them find safety. I think of ordinary women like Hana and Shannon and Katy who are women in their community, working silently behind the scenes to create a better world. I think of Jane and Jill and Julie who work tirelessly for racial justice in their community. I think of all the women in communities who are often unknown, keeping the world going. I think of Sara, a disabled woman who helps other disabled people in her community. I think of women in Ukraine, those who have left their homes and are finding food and shelter in unknown times.

I wonder if you know someone who reminds you of Tabitha. I imagine you do – and maybe you are a Tabitha. We are strengthened not only by the actions of these women but by their faith and stories. Whenever we remember them we remember that humanity has gone through difficult times, and God has been with humans, and has used the gifts of people to continue to build up one another. We remember that there are people who care about others, who invest in the community, who want to see people thrive.

I do have questions about Tabitha, though. Rev. Katy Stenta wrote in a blog this weekend, wondering out loud if Tabitha wanted to be raised from the dead.⁴ We don't know the circumstances of her death. We don't know the state of her being. We know that the work wasn't done because it is never done, and the widows surely suffered a loss when she died. Did Tabitha want to be raised, or had she come to some acceptance that her death was imminent, as is all human death?

I also wonder about her second death. I wonder about this in the story of Lazarus, as well. If people were raised from the dead, they surely died again, unless they were Jesus. Were the widows more prepared when she died again? Are any of us ever prepared for the loss of someone?

It makes me wonder what it means to be healed. Yes, the women wanted Tabitha to rise up, be healed – but perhaps even more so they needed the systems in place to be healed. They needed to know that they would be cared for and that their place in society was healed. Were they grieving Tabitha, or the fate of the widows? Were they grieving Tabitha, or their future?

The psalmist talks about God who has healed them after crying out for help. Again, what is healing, and what was healed in this situation? There are people in pain who do wish to be healed of the aches and sharp pains that never let them rest. There are people who suffer addiction or mental illness who wish to be healed. There are some people who are disabled who

⁴ Katy Stenta, "Did She Want to Get Up?" <https://katyandtheword.com/2022/05/03/did-she-want-to-get-up/>.

do not see their disabilities as something to be healed. I often think what needs healing is not a medical condition but society. It is the very world in which we live, the division, the hatred, the exclusion. It is the empires that seek to have control.

What needs healing in our community? What needs healing in our world? There are people in place to help usher those who fall into the gaps into the safety nets but individuals like Tabitha are temporary fixes. What is truly needed is for larger change, larger healing. A healing only God can provide, working through us. It is a way of seeing that tunics will only cover the humans and will not cover the problems. It is a way of understanding that the gazelles of the world can dodge the sharp rocks, but not everyone is a gazelle – and sometimes the rocks, the barriers, the hoops keeping people out need to be removed. Rather than expecting people to be gazelles jumping around the sharp, broken edges of the world, may we attempt to smooth the paths so it is accessible for all.

May we seek God's healing. May we continue to lift one another up. May we invest in the community in which God wants humanity to thrive. May we see change sooner rather than later. Amen.