

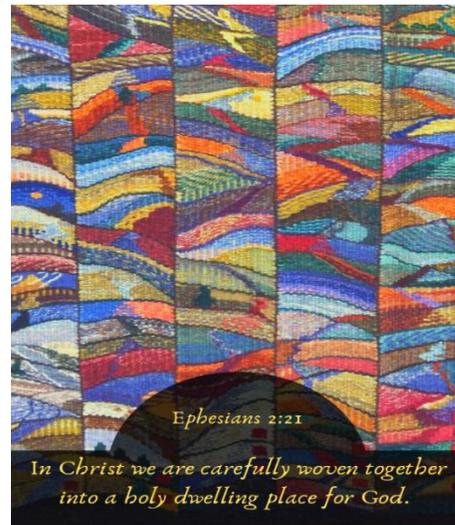
Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 12, 2019

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Psalm 23
Acts 9: 31 and 36-43

Looming Above



by J. Meetze

From Acts, chapter 9:

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God.

God, open our eyes that we may see, open our ears that we may hear, open our hearts that we feel what you might have for us today. Amen.

I have been stealing coffee from church knitting and crochet circles for years. I have done it at three different churches, and when I've been caught, the women there were nice enough to crochet little coasters for me. And in the basements and quiet halls of three different churches, I have learned a little bit about the fiber of church life...what church life is made of. Faithful women, and maybe a man, although I don't remember any, would pray and crochet without fanfare or much attention. Today's sermon has fiber artists in mind, one in particular, Tabitha, who we read had made tunics and clothing for the widows in Joppa. Today I want us to play with some weaving metaphors. My hope is that in the warp and weft of the story we learn something about the fiber of the church. And by knowing about the fiber of the church, perhaps we will become more aware of how our lives are being interwoven by and for God's purposes. For God has not only knit us together in our mothers' wombs—and a happy mothers' day to everyone—but God is knitting the church together, as Susan has mentioned. At its best, the church is a

patchwork that is beautiful in its diversity, strong in its bonds, and a comfort to those in its embrace.

If you are familiar with weaving at all, I think the story of Tabitha is weft-faced. In weft-faced weaving, the latitudinal yarn on a loom completely covers the warp, or longitudinal yarn. The longitudinal yarn serves as an unseen scaffold that supports a visible weft. Scripture is woven together with all sorts of unseen strings. Jesus feeds five thousand because a small boy is willing to offer up his fish sandwich. The subtitle may read, “Jesus feeds the Multitudes,” but underlying the miracle is a much smaller act of faith from an unnamed boy. Moses may have delivered the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt by dramatically parting the Red Sea; but Moses was first delivered by two mid-wives who disobeyed Pharaoh’s orders and protected Moses’ life. The stories that we remember in the weft are held together by the warp—the unseen, the unmemorable, the unexciting.

In the case of Tabitha, if we get our hooks into the story, we can look at how this story is strung. We can read between the lines and see beneath the weft.

Tabitha’s story is short, one of several fragments that Luke has, ahem...stitched together to showcase the varied beginnings of the early church. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.

Having two names is no small matter. In Acts 6 we could read about one of the first challenges of the church. The Hellenists complained that their widows were being neglected by the Hebrews in the daily distribution of food. Old prejudices were creating new inequities. The solution in Acts 6 was to elect seven men to address the concern, and Prochorus and Parmenas certainly aren’t Hebrew names. They elected Hellenists to address a Hellenist concern.

Yet Tabitha also goes by Dorcas. She has Hebrew and Hellenist names. Can you read between the lines with me? Tabitha is a code-switcher, a bridge-builder, a woman who could shuttle BETWEEN two cultural and linguistic worlds to see to it that these worlds were being interwoven into the one faith and fabric of the church.

There is another important matter which should not be glossed over. In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha. Perhaps a better translation of this line would read “a disciple-ess named Dorcas.” Nowhere else in all of the New Testament is the feminine form of disciple, “*mathetria*.” In one verse, we see Tabitha stitching together both a cultural-linguistic gap and a gender gap.

Is it any wonder then that when a life full of good works was over, there was a heavy burden looming above the widows who depended upon Tabitha’s charity? They put her in an upper room, and widows...people acquainted with how life changes after death...mourned for her life and the life giving work she had brought to them.

They call for Peter. It is unclear and perhaps unthinkable that they would have expected Peter to raise Tabitha from the dead. Perhaps they simply wanted to share stories of what

Tabitha had meant to them. We can speculate that Peter would bring some gravitas to the funeral of a woman who made a difference to the least and the last of Joppa.

And here our story takes a turn as Peter arrives, but it is a weft-faced turn. Peter arrives, and Tabitha becomes an object rather than an agent of charity. One could easily see parallels of power between Jesus and Peter. Jesus spoke to Jairus' daughter and said, "Talitha cum," and she was raised from the dead. Now Peter says, "Tabitha cum," and she is raised from the dead. And wouldn't it be easy to see in the weft how Peter has power just like Jesus? Bippity-Boppity-Boo this story is about Peter.

But there is more to the story than that. Peter would not even be in the room if it were not for those who called for him. Peter is brought into the upper room where Tabitha is surrounded by widows who show Peter the tangible ways Tabitha had contributed to their welfare. Cyprian, the third century bishop of Carthage wrote:

"So powerful were [Tabitha's] merits of mercy, so much did just works avail! She who conferred upon the suffering widows the assistance for living deserved to be recalled to life by the petition of widows."

According to this desert father, it was by the widows' petitions that Tabitha was recalled to life. Just as Tabitha ensured that widows would have life after the deaths of their husbands, they in turn call Tabitha to life.

I'll admit that I had a few conversations with colleagues and I've read some interesting articles about who should be considered the protagonist in the story. And if there is a "Bible as Literature" class at Woods, then we can spend an hour rehashing that question. But what is simpler to say is that looming above these seven verses is an intertwined life. Tabitha gives life to widows, widows call for Peter, and Peter gives life to Tabitha, and looming above it all is a God who knits us together so that we give life to one another. On the other hand, the forces that divide folk—men from women, Greeks from Jews, rich from poor, are the forces that kill and destroy.

Dr. King wrote:

"In a real sense all life is inter-woven. All of us are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

Who would know better than a woman who spun and wove for the first outcasts of the church just what a single garment of destiny would look like? There is just one more thread I'd like to pull. Tabitha was full of good works, and she became ill and died.

In seven verses, there is not much to connect being full of good works and Tabitha's becoming ill. We don't have a family medical history. I'm not privy to an air quality

report in Joppa. So we are again reading between the lines and looking for the warp of this story.

As I have encountered folks around church coffee pots—in knitting circles and elsewhere—I have met several strong people. In Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes' book, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, she describes strong people who sound an awful lot like Tabitha.

“She is the woman who constantly extends herself on behalf of others. In her intimate and family relationships, on her job, and in her church and community, she is the “go-to” woman, the one upon whom others depend when they need assistance, counsel, or comfort. Driven by a deeply ingrained desire to be seen as helpful and caring, she is practically incapable of saying no to others' requests without experiencing feelings of guilt and worthlessness. As her willingness to help repeatedly reinforces others' tendencies to ask her for help, her very nature becomes defined by multitasking and over-commitment. A modern day Atlas, she bears the weight of her multiple worlds upon her shoulders. And unfortunately, she is as incapable of saying ‘help’ as she is of saying ‘no.’”

Facing a barrage of clichés like, “God doesn't give us more than we can handle,” strong women continually take on more than they can handle. Dr. Walker-Barnes goes on to chronicle the physical, mental, relational and emotional challenges faced by those who are quicker to give help than request it. And if we read between the lines to look at the warp, I wonder what a counseling session between Tabitha and Dr. Walker-Barnes might look like.

By examining the fiber of Tabitha's life, what do we learn about how God has been and continues to knit the church together?

For one, charity is not tribal. While Hellenists may have been good watchdogs to make sure Hellenist widows received what was fair, Tabitha bridged that tribal divide with care. We are not to look out only for our own, whatever “our own” might mean because we are interwoven.

Second, people are to be givers and receivers of charity. Tabitha devoted her life to good works. She gave life to widows and she received life from Peter. In so many ways we are “wounded healers” who need help and grace and who can offer help and grace.

Third, we can learn by reading between the lines. Dorcas was not a preacher or theologian. She doesn't say a word in scripture, but she touched more lives in Joppa than anyone, as a part of the knit and crochet group. We learn from her story and stories like hers, whether in the pages of books or in lives around us, what it means to be interwoven in the lives of others and for God's purposes. It is in a tight-knit community where we care for one another that we encounter resurrection, and the fears that loom above us are replaced by the hope of who is looming and weaving above us.

Weave, weave, weave us together. Weave us together in unity and love.