

## A Tabitha for Every Age

Acts 9:36-43; (John 10:22-30)

*Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, Mother's Day 2019; May 12, 2019*

My mother was a self-taught seamstress and both of my grandmothers were trained seamstresses. Alas, I lack skill in this category entirely but my mother grew up poor and made a lot of her own clothes. She always looked classy on a small budget. She made a lot of the clothes for my sisters and I when we were younger. She was also a bargain hunter living on a small widow's pension by the time she was in her fifties. Since she had a bus pass, she would go into town regularly to keep checking on whether a particular clothing item was going on sale. At times, she would even wait in the hopes for additional mark downs. My mom bought bargains that did not fit but that she knew she could alter. She also always had someone else in mind who just might like a certain piece of clothing. How many of you are seamstresses? How many of you used to make or still make clothes for yourselves or for your kids or grandkids? Alternatively, who grew up with a mom who made their clothes?

Clothes can be one of the ways in which we express creativity and uniqueness in our culture. We wear special clothing for special events. They may be signs of our joy or a visible symbol of our deepest mourning. There are also many people in the world who cannot afford clothes at all. One of the mothers of our Christian faith, Tabitha, focused at least part of her ministry on this need. She is featured in the scripture passage from Acts. The name Tabitha is Aramaic and means *Gazelle*. The name is associated with beauty and grace. While we may take it for granted that this graceful woman is called a disciple in our passage, this is actually the only time in the New Testament that the feminine version of the Greek word for disciple is used. Tabitha is a *mathethria*.<sup>1</sup> She was known in her community for "good works and acts of charity." Tabitha was making an impact using her gifts and skills. ("Our" bookkeeper and member Tabitha is also making an impact and we are all rejoicing that she has been gifted with the mind for numbers!)

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<sup>1</sup> John Harvard, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4*, (Westminster John Knox; Louisville), 428.

We can tell from the text that Tabitha from Joppa had gifts as a seamstress. The town was located on a major trading route. This would probably have provided access to a lot of materials. Part of her ministry was to make tunics and other clothing for women who probably needed assistance. The text names widows. Since widows in the society at the time were dependent on a male relative to take care of them, a good number were left vulnerable and many were destitute. It sounds like Tabitha provided them with clothing that they would otherwise not have access to.

When Tabitha died, for reasons we do not know, the outpouring of grief was great. Commentators agree that the women crying were likely not hired mourners which were often called in at such times to weep at the bedside of a loved one. The people present in our story are people who have been directly impacted by Tabitha and genuinely grieve her death. Her death is so momentous that the community sends off two men to find Peter. This detail witnesses to the depth of the bonds of faithfulness between all of them. Peter was in a nearby town and was slowly gaining a reputation for being an agent of God's healing. When Peter gets there, the women show him some of the clothing Tabitha had made. These tangible gifts are part of telling her story of faithfulness and generosity.

No reason is given as to why Peter sends everyone out of the room to be alone with Tabitha. One commentator suggests that Peter may need space and quiet to open himself to the power of the Spirit. I must admit I find it rather sad. It may be a vestige of regarding women as second tier disciples after all (although the presumed author of Acts is the author of the Gospel of Luke which does give women a more dignified role). What a beautiful witness it could have been to have the community gathered for this powerful rising of a woman back to life who had done so much to honor the dignity and worth of her sisters. At least we know from earlier texts in Acts that Peter knows and names that this power does not belong to him but merely flows through him (Acts 3:13).<sup>2</sup> The risen Christ whose rising is described with the same words in Acts 2:32 that are used here is at work here.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Wall in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4*, (Westminster John Knox; Louisville) 2005, 429.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Cousar, *Texts for Preaching, Year C*. (Westminster John Knox: Louisville) 1994, 298.

Given that it is Mother's Day, I would like to keep our focus on Tabitha, our mother ancestor in the faith and others who have followed in her footsteps. Let us remember that she and those around her were devoted to being people of the "way" as the early Christian community was described. We can tell from Acts 2:42-4:7; 4:32-35 that this way was radically communal.<sup>4</sup> People shared what they had in common and believed in a God who lifted up the lowly and brought good news to the poor and oppressed. Tabitha's acts of compassion are central to the new reality of God's reign.<sup>5</sup> Yes, these early Christian women dared to live in the reign of God present here on earth now and in all of eternity no matter what the cost.

The philosopher John Moriarty once wrote that "time is eternity living dangerously."<sup>6</sup> I love this phrase! There is no time when eternity is not. Our experience of time is simply a manifestation of eternity expressing itself in lived reality. Living always invites risk taking, being there, making a difference, daring to love. Tabitha followed the way of Christ in risking her resources and pouring out her talents so that the eternal could break through in the lives of those touched by her generosity. Raising her from the dead is a way of affirming her witness and discipleship for all of eternity. It is a way of saying that our Easter God is always about renewing that which is life giving.

As John Harvard comments, "There is a Tabitha in every church, tenacious, looking for the real needs around her...Tabitha's work is too important to die (430)." I could not agree more. As you can probably imagine, reading this passage, made me think immediately about this congregation's ministry of outreach through Heavenly Threads and the SOS room. Without the attention, imagination, generosity, hard work and dedication of countless women disciples these ministries would not have evolved or flourish still.

I never had the good fortune to meet Barbara Lannaman before she died last June at the age 89. "Babs," as she was affectionately known, was the church secretary for a long time and came in touch with people in need. She started a small food pantry in the church in 1984 which

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Wall in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4*, (Westminster John Knox; Louisville) 2005, 430.

<sup>5</sup> John Harvard, in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.4*, (Westminster John Knox; Louisville) 2005, 430.

<sup>6</sup> John O'Donohue, *Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for a Modern World*, (Convergent: New York) 2015, 171.

eventually was part of what grew into the ecumenical Camden Area Christian Food Pantry. By 2011, the pantry had already served enough food to cover 634,000 meals! Given that food insecurity has been on the rise in our communities, we need to continue the work begun for us.

Barbara (who would probably be embarrassed about being talked about) also started the SOS Room at church that still provides clothing and household items for anyone in need for free. Thank you to all who have maintained and expanded this important ministry. Gayle Palmer has been spearheading this work for a long time. We just added additional SOS Room time on Thursday afternoons in line with the Food Pantry hours to serve more people in need. I can tell you that people are waiting in the parking lot before the doors even open, every week! (Your help is appreciated if you feel called to be part of this ministry).

Heavenly Threads is in its 25<sup>th</sup> year of selling quality clothing and household items and more. After covering operating costs, up to \$40,000 a year go directly to community non-profits. Volunteers, most of them women, have given countless hours of their time and creativity to make Heavenly Threads a landmark of sharing and service in the community. I know that if my mother were still alive, she would have volunteered. Madeline Shields whose life we celebrated yesterday volunteered as Heavenly Threads. Could I ask for a raising of hands of all who are part of this ministry now, directly or indirectly? Thank you so much for your service!