

Pr. Colleen Montgomery
Easter 4 C
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Virginia Synod Sermon

[If possible, I would encourage congregations using this sermon to make a fleece tie quilt for LWR. We will be doing this at Holy Trinity, Wytheville. Perhaps this can be done during coffee hour, during the offering, or have people tie a few knots on their way to or from communion. Then, if possible, if you desire, bring them to Synod Assembly and we can send them to LWR together. The link is here:

https://applications.lwr.org/wp-content/uploads/FLEECETIEDBLANKETS_INSTRUCTIONS.pdf

Ruth died just before Pastor Colleen started her call at Holy Trinity, Wytheville. Ruth's funeral was the last one the interim pastor presided over. It served a sort of transition moment for the congregation. Before and after Ruth's death more or less equalled before or after Pastor Colleen's arrival. But even though they never met, Pastor Colleen sees Ruth's legacy lived out the first Monday of every month.

Ruth was an avid participant in Holy Trinity's quilting ministry. She sewed many, many, many quilt tops that their quilting ladies still use. Even though it has been over two years since her death, they are still working through the quilt tops that she left behind. Her legacy lives on in multi-colored and multi-sized squares of fabric, stitched together with love and prayers for the future recipients. Ruth, follows in the footsteps of the woman we meet today from Acts, Tabitha.

Tabitha was a faithful Christian disciple who lived after the time of Jesus in Joppa. Before we review any of the other details about her faith and life, it is worth highlighting the importance of her being named as a disciple in the book of Acts. "Mathetria" is the Greek singular feminine noun for disciple¹. Verse 36 in the 9th chapter of Acts is the only time that this particular form of the word is used. Any other time this word is encountered in male plural or male singular forms. This means that Tabitha is the only woman named as a disciple by any

¹ Mitzi J. Smith, Working Preacher

author in the entire New Testament. Not any of the Marys. Not Martha. Not Lydia. Only Tabitha.

More than just an interesting fact to know, this is an important affirmation and witness to the validity of ministry done by women. While the expansion of gender roles and biblical interpretation now allow women to participate in all ways within our tradition, there are many traditions where this is not the case. Tabitha's faith is just one example of countless more that testifies to the necessity and inclusion of women's gifts and leadership in the body of Christ. It also raises the question of whose gifts may we be overlooking or disqualifying in the present day because they don't fit the mold of who should be a Christian leader? As biblical scholar Eric Barreto, says, "The gospel looks beyond the narrow confines we too often seek to draw."²

The only named female disciple is known by two names both translating to mean "gazelle." Tabitha, in Aramaic, and Dorcas in Greek. Being known by these two names likely indicates that she was able to function, communicate, and go in between both cultures³. She was known for her good works and acts of kindness, which many scholars believe were linked to the clothes that her mourners clung too. The tradition that has grown up around her, though not reflected in the biblical text, is that she made the clothes for the poor or she used the profits from selling the clothes to tend to the poor. Either way it is thought that her work was used to benefit others⁴.

When she dies from an illness, her community is heartbroken. They gather around her to tend to her body and mourn. I love the detail given in verse 39 "showing tunics and other clothing that she had made." We all know what it is like to be shown many objects made by loved ones who have died. Quilts, pieces of furniture, art, even whole houses. We find connection to our beloved ones in the creations left behind.

Peter arrives at the invitation of the community and performs an unexpected miracle. In fact, Peter only performs this kind of miracle once in his life. Peter prays and then tells her, "Tabitha, get up." Tabitha opens her eyes, takes Peter's hand, and stands up. She is now not only known for her faith, her good works and acts of charity, but also now as being one of the few who were resurrected.

² Eric Barreto, Working Preacher on Acts 9

³ Eric Barreto, Working Preacher

⁴ Mitzi J. Smith, Working Preacher

We don't know what happened to Tabitha after that. But her story and the miracle she experienced live on as testament to the power of our God alive in her and at work in Peter.

Tabitha's legacy has lived on in the hands of untold women, and men, throughout history as they served others in need with the creations of their hands. Specifically, the work of quilting and knitting groups come to mind. [In our own church, *you can fill in a story about your own ministries here.*]

On the national and international scale, Lutheran World Relief distributes quilts and several types of kits to help those in need. They began this work in 1945 and since then millions of quilts have been shared world wide. One stitch at a time, these quilts were made with prayers for the families and individuals who would receive them. Prayers for hope, for security, and for knowing that they are loved. A quilt can serve as more than just bedding. It can be a tent, protection from the rain, a safe place for a baby to play on.

A video on the Lutheran World Relief website tells the story of a woman weaver who lives in the Andes Mountains of South America. She makes blankets to sell to provide for herself. However, she does not have the time to make a blanket for herself. It is a loss of time and money. She treasures her LWR quilt because it keeps her warm and also allowed her to focus on her business.

This same video also tells the story of a German woman who was in a refugee camp during World War II. She was the recipient of an educational kit assembled by an American Lutheran church. Later she was able to immigrate to the United States and become a citizen. She now supports the work of LWR by making quilts and baby care kits. She knows the life changing effect these gifts can make. She is thankful to be able to pass the love of Jesus on in this way.

Tabitha's legacy, Ruth's legacy, is lived out in such acts of loving kindness. Even if you have no idea how to quilt or knit or sew, you can use your skills and gifts to help those in need. All of us are loved and blessed by God with ways to bring the grace and love of Jesus to those we encounter. Even if we are not resurrected in this life, like Tabitha/Dorcas, we can live a life poured out for others.

[If making a tie quilt: Today, with several other churches around the synod, we are going to make some fleece tie-quilts for LWR in honor of Tabitha. Insert directions for how this will happen or has happened.]

We will close by reading a verse from hymn 419 in the ELW, For all the faithful women. It's Tabitha/Dorcas' verse. It is a celebration of her life and also an invitation for us to follow in her footsteps, as Christ would lead us. To servants of Christ in love, in healing, in hope.

“Lord, hear our praise of Dorcas,
who served the sick and poor.
Her hands were cups of kindness,
her heart an open door.
Send us, O Christ, your Body,
where people cry in pain,
and touch them with compassion
to make them whole again.”

Amen.