

The Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 21, 2017
Christ the Rock Ev Lutheran Church
Farmington, NM

Acts 9:36-42 In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. 37 About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. 38 Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!"

39 Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

40 Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. 41 He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. 42 This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. (NIV2011)

"Spreading the Love"

May is a crazy time of year. It is also a joyful time of year. Today we are welcoming five new young men and women as confirmed members of our congregation. But there are probably plenty of other celebrations in your life this week or last week or next week. The end of the school year. High School graduations. College graduations. Throw in a wedding just for good measure. Crazy, but joyful.

It's crazy trying to schedule all these important events and give the people celebrating the proper attention they deserve. When you are at a graduation, it can be very inspiring. You hear about all the great accomplishments of those graduates and you can't help feeling a renewed sense of optimism about what this next generation might be able to accomplish.

In Acts chapter nine we get to learn about someone whose whose accomplishments touched the lives of so many. Her love was able to spread to so many people in need. And then, when she was the recipient of an amazing miracle, the love just kept on spreading. And that's my prayer for us today. There is a love we witness in the pages of Scripture. It's a very natural, unforced kind of love. But it's also a love that is truly infectious. Today we see God Spreading the Love.

1) Tabitha's deeds done in love stopped with her death

The best example of this is someone we could consider a hero in the Christian faith, a woman named Tabitha. We know about very little about this respected Christian Tabitha, but what we do know is very admirable. We aren't told her family situation or her personal background. But this is her reputation: **"She was always doing good and helping the**

poor.” (Acts 9:36) Of course, that only makes her sickness and untimely death all the more tragic.

After her death, the other believers in Joppa treated her with the utmost respect. They prepared her body for burial. And then they make an appeal to one of the Lord’s disciples. The Apostle Peter was serving as Christ’s ambassador in the nearby city of Lydda, where Israeli’s Ben Gurion International Airport sits. They want him to come to Joppa, where Tabitha had been busy living out her faith. Joppa is still around. In fact, it is absorbed into the modern Israeli city of Tel Aviv. We don’t hear much about the Christian church in Joppa. But we do know it was a distinctly Greek city, which made it an unlikely place to find a lot of believers in these early days of the Christian church. Maybe some believers scattered after the persecutions broke out in Jerusalem following the stoning of Stephen. Maybe it was through the preaching and teaching by Philip.

2) Peter placed in a powerless situation

We can understand the need to reach out to someone in the middle of a devastating loss. That’s why it is reasonable **“when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, ‘Please come at once!’”** (Acts 9:38) We can even relate to that sense of urgency when things go terribly wrong. But what exactly do they expect Peter to do? They are putting Peter in a tough spot.

And, you know, we wouldn’t even blame Peter if he declined to go along with Tabitha’s mourners. He just got done healing paralyzed Aeneas in Lydda. Peter has already done enough. He’s dealt with enough of other people’s problems. He has to be able to set healthy boundaries and realistic expectations. There’s not much he can do to help this dead woman anymore anyway.

Have you ever experienced celebration fatigue? I don’t know if that’s a real thing or not. But at this time of the year, there should be a name for what we get when we have all these celebrations to attend. It can get exhausting. They are parties, so they are supposed to be fun. But it can also wear us down. It happens to all of us at some time in our Christians lives. Eventually we grow weary in sharing love. Just like those celebrations, we aren’t even the main actors. We just want to be there for the special people in our lives. We just want to support and encourage them. But it takes its toll on us.

3) Complete dependence on the Risen Christ

There’s a downside to hearing about all those inspiring commencement addresses and listing off all the awards from top achievers. What about the rest of us? What about those of us who aren’t elite? Who feel pretty ordinary?

I wonder if that’s how Peter felt in Joppa. We think of him as this amazing apostle. But he had no control over which miracle God allowed him to do, how God would answer a need and demonstrate divine power in a tough situation. I’m not Peter. But I do know the sense of defeat and helplessness when put in a no-win situation. You understand when you are in over your head and you feel completely powerless to help someone in their deepest, darkest moments of need. I always feel like I have to do something, do more. I have to love

others and take care of my responsibilities. I'm constantly plagued by this fear that I need to do more. So I have to compete against others to make my contributions appear more significant. I'm looking at my life as a series of standards I need to reach so I can take a break or eventually retire from exerting so much love, giving so much of myself.

There is only one person who never ran out of love. Peter came to Joppa in the name of Jesus and came to love Tabitha's mourners with the power of Jesus. Jesus never looked at you and wanted to give up on loving you. Jesus never grew tired of reaching out to the loveless with his love. Jesus never felt overburdened in showing love. He never asked for a day off from loving you. And in the ultimate act of love, Jesus did what no one else could ever do for you: **"Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends."** (John 15:13) Jesus accomplished something bigger and better than the most decorated graduate. Jesus loves you with his perfect self-sacrificing, totally-dedicated love.

Peter understood the key to defeating faith fatigue. He understood his need to remain in Christ in the middle of this impossible situation. That's why he didn't have to think twice before making the trip to Joppa to be there for Tabitha and her mourners. Remaining in the love of Jesus is what changed this from a time of personal stress and struggle to a moment for a miracle. Remaining in Jesus reminded Peter of his own identity. Jesus says: **"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last."** (John 15:16) Peter demonstrated a faith completely dependent on Jesus Christ: **"Peter sent them all out of the room then he got down on his knees and prayed."** (Acts 9:40) He asked for privacy. Acknowledging his complete inability to do anything for this departed sister in the faith, he turns to God's power in prayer. He had seen Jesus do it multiple times. So now he calls on God to resuscitate Tabitha and simply says: **"Tabitha, get up."** (Acts 9:40)

Today's let's celebrate the accomplishments of our confirmands. But above everything else, let's celebrate the power of Jesus. The focus of faith is a complete dependence on Christ. Dependence isn't just a necessity when human limitations come up short and miracles are needed to outperform the laws of nature. Dependence on Christ is just as necessary for salvation as for living out our Christian calling. Complete dependence on Christ turns thinking of loving each other as a burden and obligation into a natural overflow of our Christian faith. It's not something you have to do for God, but the natural byproduct of remaining in Christ. That's why Peter didn't have to be forced to come down to Joppa. That's why Tabitha didn't have to be compelled to do good and help the poor. The love of Jesus remained in them and they remained in the love of Jesus.

4) Heroic results from ordinary Christians

Tabitha and Peter were friends of Jesus. Jesus said: **"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you."** (John 15:15) All those who have experienced the forgiving love of Jesus are friends. He doesn't call us inferior servants or even business colleagues. But we are on his same level, sharing his same goals and interests.

There are some questions that come to mind as we wrestle with this episode from Acts chapter 9. Why did Tabitha get this miracle? Why did God answer Peter's prayer? We don't always get clear answers to all of our questions. But we do want a bigger perspective on our struggles to show love and feel God's love in our lives.

I know today is Confirmation Sunday, but I felt the need to share an example of extreme love from Nepal. He was born into Hindu's highest caste since his father was a Hindu priest. But first his father died and then his mother. He was raised by his older brother, also a Hindu priest. But since both of his parents had died, he was considered unlucky and no one wanted to get too close to him. Unable to find the love of anyone to share his joys and sorrows, he began to despair. No one loved him as a family member. So when he was 15 he was ready to kill himself. He told a Christian friend, who in turn told him John 3:16. He didn't believe it, but it was enough to cause him to delay his plans. He agreed to read the Bible only to find all the errors in it. But in the Bible he learned about a Savior who comes to save sinners instead of the Hindu gods who come to kill sinners. This became a turning point in his life.

Becoming a Christian put him into the lowest caste in Hindu society, making him an untouchable. When he confessed his faith, his brother disowned him and threw him out. His uncle did the same thing. So he moved to a city where he heard other Christians lived. He learned the basics of the Christian faith and married a Christian wife. He figured out social work was his best opportunity to make contact with others and share the gospel. Even though he's had very little theological training, he serves a local congregation in his home town and visits others to teach them. He's been threatened by Maoist rebels and Hindu loyalists. Even now, in this time of extreme need, he wants to spread the love that shares in the joys of sorrows of every human being. He wants every soul to know the love of being part of God's family by faith in Jesus.

Today is a good time to be inspired by the ordinary believers who become heroes of faith through God's great power. On a day when we want to celebrate God's gifts to these confirmands and celebrate God's accomplishments in their lives, we can realize our ongoing need for his power and his deliverance in our lives. Tabitha combats the false notion that God can't use you. The sacrificial love of Jesus combats our feelings of inadequacy we get when we look at the gifts and accomplishments of others. The love of Jesus gifts you with more grace than you could ever need and equips you with unique gifts to use in service to others. Tabitha became well-known for the contributions she made to the lives of others by using her unique gifts. But she became indispensably loved because she shared Jesus' heart with her brothers and sisters. With the Word of God taking up residence in your heart, Christ's love spreads to you and through you. Amen.

+ May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will. Amen. +