

Sunday, May 8, 2022 – “Privileged to Serve”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Acts 9:36-43

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from Acts 9:36-43 (*Good News Translation*).

³⁶ In Joppa there was a woman named Tabitha, who was a believer. (Her name in Greek is Dorcas, meaning “a deer.”) She spent all her time doing good and helping the poor. ³⁷ At that time she got sick and died. Her body was washed and laid in a room upstairs. ³⁸ Joppa was not very far from Lydda, and when the believers in Joppa heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him with the message, “Please hurry and come to us.” ³⁹ So Peter got ready and went with them. When he arrived, he was taken to the room upstairs, where all the widows crowded around him, crying and showing him all the shirts and coats that Dorcas had made while she was alive. ⁴⁰ Peter put them all out of the room, and knelt down and prayed; then he turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ Peter reached over and helped her get up. Then he called all the believers, including the widows, and presented her alive to them. ⁴² The news about this spread all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. ⁴³ Peter stayed on in Joppa for many days with a tanner of leather named Simon.

In Joppa, there was a certain female disciple (*mathetria*) by the name of Tabitha, which in Greek also means Dorcas. Here we have one of the truly sad stories of a woman follower of Jesus. Tabitha is the only person named *mathetria* in the New Testament. This woman’s life is characterized by good (*agathos*) works (*erga*) and charitable acts for the poor (Acts 9:36). Curiously, much the same is claimed for Cornelius, the Roman centurion who is also remembered for his generosity as well as his prayers (Acts 10:2, 4). Tabitha and Cornelius, taken together, bear stories that show those with means and privilege taking responsibility for those who have less.

The notation of Tabitha’s good works occurs at her death. That’s too often a pattern among us both in the church and in society. My father used to say that one’s funeral is the only time when something nice is said about someone, even if someone was a horrible person. We sometimes fail to recognize a person’s contribution to a community until after their death. Though Luke doesn’t linger or make this observation, we may wonder if Tabitha’s constant acts of charity and goodness may have exhausted her, may have led to her death. Remember, no good deed goes unpunished. But perhaps that’s reading too much into the passage.

Some commentators note that, at Tabitha’s death, her body is prepared and placed in an upper room (*hyperoon*). You may recall that the eleven disciples met in the upper room in Jerusalem waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1:13. Only larger houses had an upper room. Perhaps this is an indication that Tabitha was not a poor widow but rather a woman of means.

The disciples in Joppa hear that Peter is in the vicinity and send for him (Acts 9:38). Peter is greeted by mourners and recipients of Tabitha’s good works with evidence of her generosity (Acts 9:39). Perhaps Tabitha was wise enough to know the wisdom in the old adage that “you can’t take it with you.” So perhaps she used resources to help others rather than for self-aggrandizement. What we do know is that she used her wealth and her talent for the benefit of those in need.

It’s customary to note that Jesus cared for and moved among the poor and dispossessed, that he took sides with those on the margins. Yes. But this Sunday’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles depicts the Risen Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, moving among the poor by working through a genuine *mathetria* who used what she had in service to others. Tabitha was

conducting her own reparations operation. In her life and death, she is put forth as an example for the rest of us would-be disciples.

Sure, Jesus frequently castigated the privileged and the powerful. But sometimes, through his call to followers, Jesus gives those of us who are privileged and powerful something good to do with the same privilege.

And let's face it. We, who live in the part of the world which controls 80% of the world's resources, a country where less than one-fifth of the world's population consumes one-half of the world's resources, need to hear and heed Jesus' call to responsibility.

The "take home" point of this Sunday's reflection is pretty straight-forward. To those who have been given much will much be required (Luke 12:48b). Those who have been blessed must share their resources of time, talents, and gifts with those who have less. We must see our resources as our God-given responsibilities. Disciples are given the gift of responsibility for others as we continue to join in the Risen Christ's resurrection work in the world.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Let us share the blessings of the Risen Christ with those in need.

Pastor Greg Rupright