

May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43

<sup>6</sup>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. <sup>37</sup>At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. <sup>38</sup>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.” <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>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. <sup>41</sup>He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. <sup>42</sup>This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. <sup>43</sup>Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

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When I entered seminary over 40 years ago, I was challenged to use inclusive language, when talking about God and humanity. Referring to men and women by using the word “man” was not allowed; using the pronouns “he/him/his” for God was not allowed. This changed my understanding and relationship to God. The main reason for this change was having to stop and think before I spoke. (If you haven’t experienced it already, let me tell you, I still have difficulty stopping and thinking before I speak.)

Making myself aware of God, before I spoke the word identifying God, changed more than my relationship with God. It changed my relationship to women. It helped me

mature, which is a nice way of saying it helped me to be more respectful and understanding, both of women and those different from me.

Forty years later, despite my best efforts, we still live in a very patriarchal, male centered and dominated society. It is hard to change culture, especially when the culture one seeks to change is so deeply embedded in our language. For example:

- Chairman – Chairwoman feels awkward, shorten to Chair
- “Man a station or table” – Staff
- mankind – humanity, humankind, kin-dom

Changing our words is hard, because it forces us to think before we speak. If we are willing to do this though, we begin to change ourselves, for the better, which, in turn, will slowly change our world for the better. One of the things that such a willingness to use inclusive language will change is how we value women.

I won’t go into detail here (although I could), but the church’s history on its treatment of women is atrocious. It demands repentance – a turning around, heading in a new direction.

One way to challenge those in the church, who would silence women or question their role as a church leader, is to look at women in the Bible. This Sunday’s story is about Tabitha, whose name translates into Greek as Dorcas, which in English is Gazelle. I am fascinated by her name, as it implies to a person who jumps with energy, moves quickly and gracefully.

Tabitha/Dorcas/Gazelle is a good example of how women have been intentionally left out of the story, when the conversation revolves around women as leaders. Dorcas,

such as in Dorcas Place, is remembered for the clothing she made, but forgotten for her other roles in the church. The description of her other roles is sparse, but enough:

- disciple
- leader
- “known for doing good and helping out”

In today’s scripture passage Gazelle was named a disciple. Disciple is a term for a follower of Jesus, a group that included women as well as men. She possibly knew Jesus personally, since Joppa is not far from Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast. She possibly was even part of the inner circle of disciples, since much of Jesus’s financial support came from women.

We have to assume Gazelle was a leader in the early church community in Joppa, as she was important enough to have others travel to Peter and encourage him to go to Joppa in support of those mourning her death. And, she was important enough for Peter to leave Lydda and go to Joppa.

Today’s story tells us too that Gazelle was “known for doing good and helping out”, in other words, she was a deacon or deaconess (if we use the feminine form). Early in the church’s formation the office of deacon/ess was established to help take care of a congregation’s needs, such as elder care, food distribution, and clothing. So, by “doing good and helping out” she was doing the work of the church.

How, then, did we then get to “women should keep silent in church” or “women are evil”?

As the early church began to establish itself, societal pressure allowed men to take control and they forced the women out of power. Women were allowed to be present and to serve, but they had to be silent.

Here is the reality, now and then:

Without the work of women the church would not be here today. It has been my experience that even today women have been the ones, by and large, who have kept the faith alive in families. There are men who recognize the importance of being involved in a faith community, but it has been primarily women who set the precedent.

I am not railing against men. After all I am one, which means I know our gender’s many limitations. Some men have been good church leaders too. But on this Mother’s Day Sunday it is important to not only name our mothers – biological, adoptive, spiritual – but also to lift them up, because despite our best intentions and efforts, women are often still treated as second class citizens, in our society and in some churches.

It is important for us to publicly acknowledge how we have been nurtured and encouraged by the women in our lives. They not only nurtured our bodies and minds, they nurtured our spirits. For most of us, women, through their unconditional love, have been the hand, voice, and face of God; seeing us for who are and supporting us through trying times. In so many ways, because of the love they shared with us, they, like Gazelle, continue to rise up in our lives, walking with us, encouraging us, supporting us, and always loving us; showing us what it means to be alive.

On this Mother’s Day, then, we give God thanks for all the women in our lives, who like Gazelle, have done us good and helped us out, sharing with us a faith that helps us conquer our fears and allows us to grow into all God desires us to be. Amen.