

Get Up!

May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43

<sup>36</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.



As we begin this time together, I draw your attention to the background image for this morning. At the center is a woman, surrounded by many other people. In this case

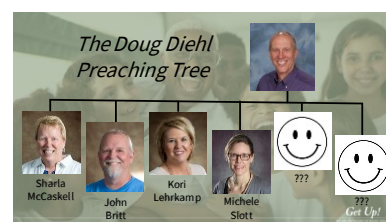
those surrounding her are young people. They could be people her age or people older than her or a variety of people. The one in the center could be younger or older; it could be a male figure. As we begin, these are all possibilities for community, for connection, for relationship. In God’s kingdom, there are no barriers to who can be in the family of God. As we begin to explore the idea of community today, let us pray...

Our passage for today is set in the city of Joppa – an ancient Mediterranean seaport that was a center for trade and commerce. Today Israel’s capitol city, Tel Aviv, sits upon the place where Joppa once was. In the opening verse we read, *“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.”* Tabitha was a central figure in the faith community. She was what we would call a “saint”. Tabitha was a matriarch of the church in Joppa. She was known for her good works, for the things that she did for others. In terms of connection, community, relationships – Tabitha was at the center of that web for many people. She was very important to those in the faith community.

This idea of connections and doing for others made me think of similar webs or groups that I have known of or been a part of. The first one that came to mind for me comes from the sports world. Growing up in Connecticut, long ago I became aware of what is known as the Bill Belichick coaching tree. Coach Belichick has led the New England Patriots as their head coach since 2000. Love him or hate him, he has led the team to six Super Bowl wins. Over the course of his career, Belichick has become known for raising up and mentoring young coaches. In total, nine of his assistant coaches have gone on to be head coaches in the NFL. Here are the most prominent of these coaches. Each of coaches credits Belichick with helping them to become head coaches. He hired them, trained them up, spoke for them when they were interviewing for promotions in other organizations. As these coaches moved on to other organizations – becoming competitors to Belichick – he has been known to continue to teach and mentor and guide these men.



This idea of a coaching tree led me to think of the group that I meet with on Tuesday mornings to discuss the lectionary readings and thoughts on the message for the upcoming Sunday. I call this group the “Doug Diehl Preaching Tree”. Doug was the lead pastor at First UMC in Rapid City for twelve years. During that time Doug mentored and raised up many of the preachers in our area. Doug poured into us, nurtured and encouraged our call, guided us into ministry. Here is Doug’s preaching tree. Sharla, Kori, Michele, and I continue to meet with Doug, to be mentored and guided by him. Last week I asked you to consider your call story, the moment that you decided to take on the title “Christian.” Doug was very much a part of what I wrote down. He continues to be a vital and important part of this web or community of faith. Doug continues to mentor clergy that are coming up in the Dakotas Conference, guiding still others on their journey into serving the Lord.



As was and is the case with Bill Belichick, as was and is the case with Doug Diehl, the positive differences they made in other’s lives wasn’t made because they held a title – head coach or lead pastor. There are many head coaches, lead pastors, and others in positions of authority who do not raise up others, who do not pour into other’s lives. Men and women like these two make a difference by their labors, by the things they do for others, by the way that they give themselves away. In their own ways, people such as these create ripples, radiating out from their lives, intersecting with the lives of those they meet, creating webs of connection, relationship, and community. Such was the case with Tabitha too. Through her labors, through her acts of love and charity, Tabitha formed a tree of sorts – a community of faith with herself at the roots.

In verse 37 we then read, *“At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.”* Just like that, Joppa First UMC lost one of the pillars of the church, one of the most important people in all of their lives. Just like that the one who gave and gave to each of them and to the larger community was dead. You know their story. I know their story. We have all lost people who were important to us, who were interconnected with us, who were a part of our community. We all know what they were feeling.

The threads that bound Tabitha to her faith community were many and they were strong. Illness and death had come to sever those threads. The community was left heartbroken. Sometimes it is not death that severs the threads of community or relationship. We can speak words that break relationships. We can do things that cut off friendships. We can make choices or decisions that tatter and unbind the connections that we have with others. Death is not the only thing that can bring an end to connection, relationship, and community.

Threads bound the community to Tabitha – both figuratively and literally. Tabitha’s gift was making clothes. She made clothes for those in her community of faith and for those in the community of Joppa. Tabitha offered clothing as gifts of love – both in the sense of a gift of love to express her Christian love to her fellow believers and as a gift of love to express her faith to those in need in the larger community. Because the threads were broken, those at Joppa First UMC reached out to one who could maybe restore those threads, who could maybe reweave those threads of community back together.

You see, they had heard that Peter was nearby, in the town of Lydda, just southeast of Joppa. Peter had just performed a miracle there, and since he was close by, they sent two men to ask Peter, *“Please come without delay.”* Upon receiving their request, we read in verse 39 that Peter got up and went with them. As Peter arrives at the house, he is led upstairs to the room where Tabitha’s body lay.

What do you think the mourners were thinking? Were they hoping for a miracle? Were they thinking that just maybe, just maybe... In the text we see that they did not ask for anything in particular. They just asked Peter to come and they do not even ask him anything once he is there. Once there, those gathered begin to show Peter the tunics and other clothing that Tabitha had made for them. In this way they were telling Peter the story of love that Tabitha had for them. In these garments they were offering physical signs of a tangible and real love. These items of clothing were literally the ties that bound them together in love and community and connection and relationship. The mourners were showing Peter what a servant Tabitha was to others. They pointed to the clothes that they wore, representing Tabitha’s love for them and their love for Tabitha. These clothes, they were symbols of love and community and connection and relationship.

This sharing of stories of when and how they received this tunic or that piece of clothing, the joy of the relationship that led to the giving and receiving of such a gift – this scene reminds me of experiences at funerals and prayer services and visitations. During the informal time, there is often joy and laughter as memories and times together are shared.

As people recall the connection, the relationship, the community, the conversation evokes good thoughts and emotions. Remember when... I think back to that time... He or she was always so... On that trip to... I'll always cherish...

You know these conversation, these feelings, right? You've been there too. Peter was being drawn into these conversations, into these memories, into the community, into the connections, into the ways that this faith community was tied to Tabitha. And then the mood shifted. It must have been like that moment when people are asked to take their seats, when the family is gathered up in the side room, when the time comes for the funeral to begin. Maybe someone glanced over and saw Tabitha's body lying there, washed and still. Maybe the stories ended and a quiet fell over the room, mourners turning to their own thoughts, their own sadness.

In verse 40 we read, *"Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed."* Peter shooed them all out of that upstairs room and he got to work. He prayed. What do you think he prayed for? He probably prayed for her family and for the community of faith that was hurting so badly. He probably prayed for those in the larger community who would no longer have this saint pouring into their lives too. He probably prayed for Tabitha and her family, for their grief and sorrow. He probably prayed for guidance – about what to do, about what words to offer her family and her community of faith.

The community of faith was probably praying too. Outside the door or just downstairs, what do you think they prayed for? Probably for some of the same things – comfort and strength for themselves, for her family, for the communities that she touched.

And maybe some prayed for something more, for God to become manifest, for life to come again. Could have they prayed these prayers? Could they have thought a miracle possible? After all, she had died. They had washed her body and placed it in the upstairs room. But the body had not been anointed. It had not been wrapped in the grave cloths. Was there still some unspoken hope, some desperate faith still there?

Maybe the Holy Spirit spoke into Peter's heart. Maybe he remembered the day that he was there with Jesus, just him and James and John, in another upper room with a grieving father and mother and their dead daughter. Maybe he recalled Jesus reaching out a hand and calling out, *"Talitha coum"* – little girl, rise. In verse 40 we see that Peter turns to the body and says, *"Tabitha, get up."* She opens her eyes, sees Peter, and sits up. Taking her by the hand, Peter helps her to her feet and calls the community of faith back together, back into relationship, back into connection. I imagine that they were filled with equal parts joy and disbelief.



The threads that were torn asunder are remade. The connection, the relationship, the community that had been lost was restored. Tabitha would once again be at the center of that little church, once again pouring into their lives and into the life of the larger community. Yet all was not simply as it once was. The loss, the grief, the sorrow – they have a way of helping us to appreciate, to value, to understand in deeper ways the connection, the relationship, the community.

Earlier I said that death is not the only thing to sever connections, relationships, community. We can speak words, we can do things, we can make choices or decisions that do harm, that separate us from others. Death is not the only thing that can bring an end to connection, relationship, or community. In our passage today, Peter did something that we often think outside of our capabilities. Could you or I do what he did in Acts 9? I am not going to say we cannot. But we certainly feel it more within our ability to restore a friendship or some other connection that we have harmed or broken with our words, actions, decisions or choices.

When we can get beyond ourselves, when we can humble ourselves and offer sincere apology and make efforts to restore or rebuild a connection, we too experience a type of new life. When we are able to restore connection, to rebuild relationship, to rejoin community, we too appreciate, value, and understand these in deeper and more powerful ways. We too can be a part of reconciliation and restoration in our own lives and in the world in general.

This is what happens as our passage concludes. As the joy and celebration over having Tabitha back fills the house, Peter slips out the door. Peter walks down the street and knocks on the door of Simon the tanner. Peter, the devout Jew, the one who is still struggling a bit with the idea of how wide God's circle of love really is, begins to take another step in opening that circle a little wider. The most recent step had occurred inside the home of Tabitha. Peter had followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit to go to Joppa, to enter the home of a Gentile woman. He then allowed the Holy Spirit to guide him to bring restoration to that little church community. And now he walks down the street and knocks on the door of an old friend, one he hasn't seen since childhood.



You see, Simon became a tanner. This was an occupation seen as unclean by the Jews. A devout Jew would not associate with such people. Experiencing the power of God to make all things new, knowing firsthand the power of Christ's Spirit to restore and renew connection, community, relationship, Peter knocks on the door of Simon the tanner. The circle is cracking a bit wider. God has worked in and through Peter to restore one beloved by the community of faith. Peter is beginning to understand how wide God's love really is. Next week, as we turn to Acts 11, Peter will continue his journey towards understanding the depth and width and breadth of God's love.

As we draw to a close, I invite you to consider where in your life there is need for a restoration or a rebuilding of connection, relationship, or community. Like Tabitha and the community that she loved, we are all meant to be connected, woven together if you will. And like Pastor Doug and those of us who he mentored and guided and encouraged, we are better when we live in connection, relationship, or community. You and I are much the same in this way. We are the lives that we touch and that touch us. Together, connected, intertwined – we are the threads that we weave and we are the threads that we wear. Sometimes it is in the simplest ways that we are reminded of this.

Last week, as I prepared to lead worship at Open Heart UMC, Pastor Doug said to me something that he said often during many years ago when I was his associate pastor: "Preach the Word." It was both a reminder of our calling and a word of encouragement to me. We are called to love one another, to be in community together, to live in relationship with one another. Where in your life do you need restoration or rebuilding or reconciliation? What simple word or gesture can you extend to begin that process?

Whose door do you need to knock on this week? God's blessings on us all as we seek to be light and love and healing in a dark and disconnected and hurting world. Amen.

**GPS – Grow, Pray, Study**

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about those who have mentored you, how can you be a mentor to others? Who might be someone that you could mentor?
- 2) *Pray*. Where does your life need restoration or reconciliation? Pray for help.
- 3) *Study*. Read Acts 10:1-33. How does Peter's encounter with God and his experience with Cornelius open his eyes to the wideness of God's love?