

Celebrate!
Acts 9:36-42
November 11,2019
Rev. Marcia B. Bailey, preaching

It started out as a funeral story. The friends of Tabitha, or Dorcas (one being her Hebrew, and the other her Greek, name) had gathered to wash the body of their dear friend who seemingly died unexpectedly. It is likely these are the same friends who cared for her during her illness. No doubt as they tended her in their final act of love and gratitude, they told the stories of their relationships with her through their tears. They recounted time after time when Tabitha went out of her way to reach out to others, to help those in need, to supply clothing and comfort to those without, to give generously of her wealth so that others would have enough. This was unbelievable; how could they continue without her? It occurred to someone to send for Peter, to see if by some miracle he might be able to do something, or at least join their mourning as prepared to bury a disciple.

Yes, a “*disciple*.” She is a *mathetria*, a “female disciple”, the only time this Greek word is used. Peter does come and they surround him, showing him the clothes she has handmade and provided for them, sharing their grief as they recalled her faithfulness to building relationships and reaching out to those in need.

As I said, it *started* as a funeral story. But Peter cleared the room and prayed. And Tabitha, miraculously, was alive again, resurrected after days of death. Her friends were joyful, the community grateful: many came to believe in the transforming power of God because of her.

It is a stunning story, the story of death to life! It is a story of faithfulness and of hope. It is a story of witness and new life. “The fact that two men are sent to Peter, to ask for his help, indicates that Tabitha’s death was untimely,” Marg Mowczko writes. “The church regarded it as

a tragedy. If Tabitha had been elderly, it is hard to envisage that the church would have gone to the trouble to fetch Peter from Lydda; the journey there and back would have taken the two men a minimum of two days. Clearly, Tabitha was a valued and vital member of the community, and Peter is persuaded to come to Joppa.” (<https://margmowczko.com/tabitha-dorcas-disciple-acts-9/>)

And when Peter arrived, they couldn't help but show him their clothes, each with its own story, the story of compassion, of relationship, of hardship accompanied by one who's own life was financially blessed. It was like a living fashion show! They paid tribute to Tabitha's lifechanging contribution to their lives; who she had been, what she had done, had amazing impact on their lives.

We have come this morning to celebrate! You can thank the Stewardship Committee—Corinne Griffiths, Nancy Unruh, Deb Brauner, with the help of Rick and Scott Unruh, for whatever impact our festive look has on *you* today! A year ago, we might have identified a little more strongly with the sadness of this story but today, just a year later, we are celebrating! Celebrating the blessings God has provided this congregation! Celebrating the faithfulness of generations of people who have embodied the gospel and lived in faithfulness for *their* time so that all this would be here for *our* time. We are celebrating the power of discernment and the Voice we have collectively heard, the risks we have taken, the people we have encountered, the relationships we have made, the hope that we have and the passion we are developing for embodying justice and Jesus in our own time, in this place, in our neighborhood and in the world! Would that people say about *us* what they said about Tabitha when we die! That we used our resources to transform lives, to build relationships, to extend the tangible reach of justice beyond ourselves to those on the margins, to those whom society has discounted, to those whom

Jesus himself would have associated with in order that the loving presence of God might be manifest in our world!

We are celebrating! The transforming power of God which can and does raise to life those who have died, including us! We are celebrating! The incredible opportunity we have before us to make meaningful, transforming relationships in our community and in the world! We are celebrating all that has happened in us and through us in this past year....as we begin to consider our call and response to the work that lies ahead of us.

A year ago, we had just completed a series of conversations with Dr. Dwight Lundgren as we debriefed our recent past and prepared to move into an uncertain, but hopeful future.

Collectively, you decided to allow the past to be just that, past, and to move with intentionality into the future. Celebrating what has been good and helpful, letting go what is no longer life-giving and productive, you prepared yourselves to be open to God's Spirit for the way ahead.

To that end, in Feb we had an envisioning retreat that was strongly supported by nearly everyone in our congregation. We spent an entire day listening for God, reflecting on the biblical text and identifying what we heard and what we felt we were being called to: building relationships with our neighbors, extending our welcome, using music as a medium of connection and praise. And we have spent the last eight months living into this vision.

Do you remember that I said that I wanted us to do ONE NEW THING in the six months that followed that retreat? *One new thing* was what I asked. Today we are celebrating ALL the things we have done, (and I may be missing a few but here goes):

We let go of VBS, and instead worked with each other and with businesses and community organizations to host a well-attended, much appreciated Community Summer Fest, introducing

ourselves to our neighborhood in new ways, planting seeds for new relationships as we deepened old ones.

We voted unanimously to become a Welcoming and Affirming congregation and a member of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, formalizing and publicizing our affirmation and celebration of LGBTQIA individuals and families in our communities.

We began monthly Worship in Action experiences where we deepen our connection between what we do on Sunday and who and what we are the rest of the week, making the link between our worship and our work in the world.

We filled our building, making and deepening relationships with the YWCA, Steel River, CCLU and NA. The Y, Steel River and CCLU each came to worship with us, and additionally we worshipped at the Interfaith Cluster, learning about the work and ministry of each organization and how we might connect to them in the future. Organizations became actual *people* to us; names have *faces* now. And, with the help of the work of Eric Law, we are now beginning to imagine even more risky yet transformative ways of deepening these relationships as the year goes on.

In addition to worshipping at the Cluster, we worshipped in our yard, in the Grove at Shekel, and beside a swimming pool. We went to a play, and we spent time, both here and in our community, with our small-in-number, but big-in-energy-and-heart, youth—playing miniature golf, creating party bags for kids who can't afford a celebration, playing games, doing a church building scavenger hunt, enjoying a corn maze. At the same time, these talented young people played instruments in worship and participated in worship leadership, offering their gifts to God and to us.

Twelve of you have been attending Adult Learning Community, thinking deeply about the resources God has given to us as a people of faithful and how we might reimagine our use of them both internally and externally in order to recirculate the leadership, truth, relationships, money, wellness, time and place God has given us. We wrap up that conversation this week and begin our focus on the biblical narratives for Advent and Christmas next week.

We participated in the Amazing Raise and we raised a total over \$15,000 together!

And you called me as your permanent pastor.

What did I leave out?! I asked you to do ONE thing! And look at all we have to celebrate! And we have accomplished it all with just about 25-30 people, with very little money in our budget but with generous hands and generous hearts!

In thinking about the story of Tabitha, Dr. Mitiz Smith reflects, "...there are few people, few disciples of any gender, who would risk their economic status in order to provide for the less privileged. By taking such a risk, our good works and just acts challenge and transcend unjust systems. Many of us first consider how our giving will or will not diminish or increase *our* (emphasis mine) living. We are willing to talk about "dying for Christ" but not risking our living for others."

"It is the spirit of Tabitha, the Spirit in her, that we hope will take on an immortality among the living. Tabitha used her privilege -- her wealth, just acts and gifts, and prophetic speech -- for the benefit of the less privileged: the widows, indigent, the hungry, depressed, oppressed, marginalized, and penalized."

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2814.

So, I ask you, what is our "spirit" today? What is God's Spirit saying to you about the ways in which we can effect change in this place? When the Stewardship Committee was thinking about

all these accomplishments and I asked them to consider a theme, it was not lost on me that it was someone who has been forced to live her life in the shadow of death these last several months who immediately said, “Celebrate!”

We are called to serve one another, and we celebrate God’s Spirit’s movement in our midst. This week you will receive a letter inviting you to make a pledge to support God’s vision for our ministry in the year to come. There are copies of a proposed budget as well as a narrative budget in Echo Hall. Pick one up if you haven’t gotten one. Read it. Pray about it. Imagine your place in this work ahead. We celebrate all who have brought us to this place; yet this isn’t the story of a funeral, as some might have thought as recently as a year ago. This is the story of new life, and *you*, by the power of God at work within you, are making resurrection happen in this place!

Celebrate!