

'Helping Hands'

Scripture Readings: *Proverbs 31:19-20 & Acts 9:36-43*

The very first sermon I ever delivered, decades ago, was titled, "What's in a Name?" I was so nervous, having to speak in front of the whole congregation!

I wrote it, and rewrote it, and then I even recorded it.

Sherry's parents came over to play cards on the Friday night, as was our tradition. They left about 2 o'clock in the morning, and my father-in-law asked if he could take my recording with him, to critique it.

My memory of that night is crystal clear. My in-laws driving away, & me not noticing that my father-in-law had slipped the cassette into the car's player and wound down the windows, playing my sermon at a bizzillion decibels for all the neighbours to hear.

Then with a final wave, they drove away with the sound of my voice blasting, "What's in a Name?" A wonderful memory of my late father-in-law! Whether the neighbours felt the same is another story.

Let's concentrate on one particular name. Well, "Tabitha" actually had two names - Dorcas was her name in Greek, but her name in Aramaic was Tabitha, and, for purposes of clarity, let's stick with the Aramaic. Both versions of her name mean "gazelle". She was aptly named as she was slim, with long legs, maybe a good runner too. {Who knows?}

She was the kind of person that everyone loved. No one said anything bad about Tabitha, and she certainly never said a bad word about anybody else. Not only did everybody love her - that love was reciprocal too.

Tabitha had a God-given talent - she could sew. She could make anything - a shirt, a jacket...she even made quilts. But not only did she have the gift of sewing, she had another gift too, the gift of charity. So, she made all these clothes only to give them away...not a dissimilar ministry to our own 'Helping Hands.'

Interestingly, we have no record of anything she may have said, but we do know of her work, because her life of servanthood spoke so loudly.

Most commentators think she was a widow or single, because there is no mention of any man in her life. But domesticity was certainly in her CV. She fed, clothed and housed all those she could, those unable to care for themselves.

Women were accorded special status by Jesus. They accompanied him on his journeys and were financial contributors.

Women stayed with him when he hung on the cross, and they were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

As you read through the New Testament, you will glean how women were very much involved in the global expansion of the church. Just in Romans 16 alone, we read of Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persia. But Tabitha stood out from other women in the New Testament. She alone has been referred to as a 'disciple', the only woman to have that distinction.

A disciple was a learner, a follower, and one who was determined to be like his or her teacher. Let's face it, one of the highest compliments someone can pay you is to say, "You act just like Jesus."

That could be said of Tabitha, the doer of deeds. The needs of people not only moved her, she moved in response to the needs she saw.

She served, and people knew it was because of her Saviour. That was her identity. She was saved to serve. Our Miss Gazelle was a devoted disciple who used her gifts and abilities to further the kingdom.

Wouldn't you agree that there are more people filled with words than there are people filled with works? Tabitha would abound and overflow with good deeds.

There's a story from the first world war, of a nurse who laboured among the wounded troops. Her face had been disfigured in a fire when she was younger. She was asked why she volunteered to work among so much death and carnage, and she replied, "The wounded soldiers don't notice my scars as much as the others. To them, I'm beautiful."

Tabitha didn't do anything heroic like Deborah, who served as Israel's Judge when no man would step forward. Nor was she a risk-taker, like Rahab, who hid Israelite spies from the Romans. She simply served her Saviour by ministering to the marginalized, particularly the widows.

Widows did not have Social Security or pensions back then. When their husbands or the male bread-winners died, they were often reduced to begging for food. If they were to be cared for, it was their family or the church that did so.

Tabitha is the model of a devoted disciple who did good deeds in quiet, sacrificial and unassuming ways.

Now, we have learned that she was a seamstress. But Tabitha was doing more than just weaving & sewing. Look at Proverbs 31:19-20: "In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy."

In his book called, "The Conspiracy of Kindness," Steve Sjogren states that while less than 10% of Christians have the spiritual gift of evangelism, 90% have the gift of serving. His church in Cincinnati is involved in what they call "servant evangelism," where they have washed cars, cleaned toilets, shined shoes and grilled hot dogs in parks – all for free with no strings attached. During these explosions of kindness, they have seen many people so moved, that they eventually come to church and become part of it.

Apparently, Tabitha's unique, compassionate contribution was so important to the Joppa Church, that when she died, God raised her back to life!

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, because Tabitha has died!' Peter went with them, and when he arrived, he was taken to an upstairs room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Tabitha had made while she was still with them." They were crying because her death meant their own death as well. As they surrounded Peter, they put her deeds on display by pointing to their own clothing.

The phrase "robes and other clothing" in the original language, refers to both their undergarments and their outerwear. Tabitha had made everything they were wearing. They were literally clothed by her compassion. This is an amazing episode in the life of the early church.

Peter, no doubt, remembered an experience he had with Jesus, (told in Mark 5:41), when a little girl had died. Seeing all the commotion and crying, Jesus told them all to go outside. Then, with Peter, James and John as witnesses, He took her by the hand and said to her, 'Talitha kum!' (which means, 'Little girl, I say to you, get up!') Now Peter changes just one letter and says, "Tabitha, kum!" and she gets up! She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called the believers and the widows and presented her to them alive."

Some of us are sceptical when we read about things like this. Does God really do miracles, even today?

I watched a night time special a while back, about supposed healings taking place in Florida, and after watching it, I wonder what the truth really is. However, none of these television evangelists have ever claimed to be able to bring a dead person back to life.

There are at least ten "resurrections" recounted in the Bible. My favourite is when a man named Eutychus fell into a deep sleep during a sermon (imagine that!!) and fell out of a window to his death. Paul raised him from the dead and then kept on preaching until morning – this time the guy stayed awake. (*Acts 20:9-10*).

And here, Jesus, through Peter, raised Tabitha from the dead. We don't hear about what happens next, but I don't think she went out on a speaking circuit to give her testimony. I'm convinced that after she regained her strength, she went right back to her quiet and unassuming service. As it is written, "This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord." Now, this is actually the greater miracle.

Some of you really excel in expressions of servanthood, because God has given you a special ability to serve.

Perhaps you're a quiet practitioner of acts of kindness, as was Tabitha. You notice needs which others don't even see, and you find joy in meeting them. This is one of the most important evangelistic methods, because servant evangelists touch people nobody else can reach. Serving breaks through cynicism and a "helping hand" can soften a hardened heart. Whether it's making meals, knitting or sewing clothes, fixing cars, hanging drywall, or working in a Food Bank, God can use you to point people to Christ.

We are blessed in our church to have a great number of servant-Christians. But I would like to draw special attention to the women of this congregation...those who serve on committees, feed us, organize fund-raising events, send clothing to those in need around the world, and serve in countless other anonymous ways. These active women embody love in all they do and **show** love in every endeavour, just like Tabitha.

It is the actions we do, that show our love - the love that Christ showed for us. St. Francis of Assisi nailed it when he said, "At all times preach the gospel. When necessary, use words." AMEN