



“Fabric of Life”

Acts 9: 36-43

Rev. Jennifer Knutsen

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I can remember visiting my great grandmother’s house on outskirts of New Orleans when I was a young girl. She was a Cajun-French woman originally from the Bayou Lafourche, Louisiana. Her name was Aurelie Naquin. We called her Grandma — my sisters and I, my parents, my grandparents — we all called her Grandma. Her first language was Cajun French, which she spoke when she was growing up in the Bayou. By the time she was married and living in New Orleans, she mostly spoke English, but in a French kind of way with French words thrown in.

“Ah cher, I’m going to make my groceries and cook you something good.”

Once, I got to hear her speak in French — and then the words were mostly French, with a few English words thrown in — for modern things she didn’t know how to say in French — like radio, television and refrigerator.

Listening to her talk was like looking at one of those pictures where everything is in black and white except for one color. The one color pops out and the rest recedes to the background.

“Bonjour ma cherie, asset toi, blah, blah.”

“Attend un moment, blah, blah, blah television, blah, blah.”

“As tu faim, blah, blah, blah refrigerator?”

I was intrigued with Grandma. Going into her house was like entering another world. For one thing, she was Catholic (whereas the rest of the family was Protestant). And her faith was displayed all around her house. She had icons, candles, rosary beads,

and religious objects all over the place— by the door, on the walls, on the windowsills. They weren't fancy or expensive, some of them were plastic, but they were colorful and they caught my child's eye.

The one thing I really didn't like was her dog — a small chihuahua that barked a lot and looked like skin and bones to me. But that was offset by the wonderful pralines she made from scratch—two kinds, one with white sugar and coconut, the other with brown sugar and pecans; both delicious, fresh, and cooling on the kitchen counter whenever we arrived.

I was lucky that Grandma lived a long life — she died at 94, I think, so I had a chance to know her and remember her. Now that I am older, and am still intrigued by religion, I sometimes wish I had some of those Catholic things that had been special to her.

The only tangible thing I do still have from her is a small quilt she made as a doll blanket. There were several of these, and my sisters have some, too.

When we were girls we wrapped our baby dolls in the quilts. When I got older, I wrapped my violin in the quilt so the instrument wouldn't rattle inside the case as I carried it to and from high school on the back of my bike. Now the quilts are doll blankets again — for my daughters' dolls. It's amazing how much love has been passed on through these pieces of sewn cloth. I like that the blankets remind me of Grandma; I also like that it feels like a little part of her lives on even still.

Many of you are sewers, weavers, knitters, crocheters and quilters, or members of your families are. You have stories that resonate with this experience.

Our scripture reading from Acts tells another such story — about a woman who died and was brought back to life and remembered through the gift of her sewing.

When we first meet Tabitha, actually, she has just died. A group of friends — a group of widowed women in particular — have gathered in shock and disbelief around her body trying to come to terms with what has happened. No matter how death comes, when or where, there is always a time when the reality sinks in. The women were gathered to grieve the loss of a loved one.

But it was more than that. More than Tabitha herself, they also were grieving the loss her death represented to their community. If we look closely at this story there are important details — clues that show us that Tabitha was not only a beloved friend, she was also an important leader, a generous benefactor, and quite literally a life-line to the most vulnerable people in her community — namely the widows who had come to be with her at her deathbed.

Here's the first clue: Tabitha is called a disciple. She is the only woman in all of the New Testament to be identified using the feminine form of the word disciple. In Greek the masculine form for disciple is *mathetes*; Tabitha is called the feminine form of the

same word *mathetria*. In the patriarchal context of the Bible, a detail like this cannot be overlooked. Surely there were other female disciples of Jesus, but Tabitha is identified in a unique way — as a woman and as a disciple — emphasis on both! Being called *mathetria* means she is a leader, a woman with power and influence.

Here's another clue: Tabitha is known by two names in two different languages. In Aramaic, her name is Tabitha; in Greek, her name is Dorcas. In both languages the name translates to mean "gazelle." In the ancient world, gazelles were symbols of grace and beauty. We do not know if "gazelle" was her given name or a name she came to be known by, but we do know that her name in either language evokes the image of a graceful, beautiful woman and that's how she was remembered.

The book of Acts is the second volume of the story begun in the Gospel of Luke, and one of the larger themes of Acts is the story of the church as it grows following the resurrection of Jesus. It might be that Luke translated Tabitha's name from Aramaic to Greek to help signify the movement of Christianity from its beginnings in the Jewish community into the broader, Greek speaking community of new believers. It is also possible that Tabitha herself spoke both languages (as Jesus likely did). After all she lived in Joppa, a cosmopolitan port city near the sea where many people of different backgrounds would have gathered.

Two more clues: We are told Tabitha "was devoted to good works and acts of charity." And when the women gather to mourn her death, they bring with them articles of clothing that Tabitha had made for them. It turns out Tabitha lived her faith devoted to the particular charitable act of making and giving clothing to the widowed women of Joppa. The clothing was very special to these women — more than sentimental gifts, they were valuable necessities of life. Clothing in the ancient world was expensive; everything had to be made by hand; it was labor intensive; the materials were costly. A poor person might have had only a couple of articles of clothing for themselves, and here Tabitha has clothed a whole community of women — providing financially likely from her own resources and her own labor, to care for the poorest, most vulnerable members of her community.

All of these clues give us a picture of a woman who was a gracious, powerful, wealthy, generous, disciple of Jesus Christ. A woman devoted to living out her faith by advocating for the poorest of the poor, the lowest of the low, who at that time were the widowed women.

Doesn't she seem like a person you would have liked to know? Too bad we sometimes miss the nuances of Tabitha's story, tucked in among a lot of other stories in Acts where all the attention seems to be on Peter and Paul.

In one way of telling it, even this story about Tabitha seems to be all about the power of Peter. The story means for us to understand Peter to be a miracle worker who is following in the footsteps of the other great miracle workers who can raise people from the dead. — Like Elijah who raised a widow's son and Elisha who raised up the

Shunemmite woman's son, and Jesus who raised up Jairus's 12 year old daughter. Raising people from the dead is meant to be a sign of an authentic ministry! Peter practically uses the same words that Jesus did. When Jesus raised up the little 12 year old girl, he said, in Aramaic, "talitha cum" which means "little girl, get up." That sounds a lot like what Peter says, "Tabitha cum," "Tabitha, get up".

No doubt Peter is a disciple of Jesus! No doubt Peter has learned to preach and pray and baptize new converts into the faith and even raise up new life when all seemed to be lost. His is an authentic ministry.

But Tabitha, too, is a disciple of Jesus. Isn't hers another form of authentic ministry? One which may not be so much about power as empowerment— both her own empowerment and the empowerment of those around her. Hers is a ministry that calls forth life among a community of followers, through acts of grace and benevolence, in crafting beautiful, practical garments, and perhaps even teaching life-giving skills of spinning or sewing or weaving to empower hope and promote life in an ongoing way.

This is a resurrection story — about raising up new life in something that was thought to be dead. Not only is Tabitha raised to new life, her whole community of women are raised up, too. In this story, resurrection is not mystic and otherworldly, but tangible and practical. New life is in the fabric — sewn into clothing to be worn on the bodies of the living. Clothing to be made and sold to finance life for women who had no other means. Clothing that is beautiful and comforting to wear. Resurrection power is in this fabric of life and in the gathered company of women who were empowered to share it.

I agree with Thomas Troeger who credits the company of believers in this resurrection story:

He says, "There is a point in the text where I become suspicious of Luke. Luke says that Peter sent all the women out of the room and then raised Tabitha to new life, as if Peter were the sole vessel of God's restoring power. I do not believe it. I believe the women had already released the power of new life into the room, because when they touched those garments, they touched more than a piece of cloth. They touched the spinnings and weavings and sewings of a life so dedicated that the woman was called 'disciple' even by a patriarchal writer like Luke. Touching those clothes, Tabitha's community touched the fabric of their existence. They reclaimed their connection to this lovely, generous woman, who was connected to Jesus Christ the risen Savior. When the women brought out those stories, brought out the spinnings and the weavings and sewing of their life together, the Risen Christ joined them, the Christ who had lived in this woman, the Christ by whose power Peter said, 'Tabitha, get up.'"

Just before Jesus died, he gathered with his disciples in an upper room. He washed their feet, shared bread and wine with them, and said remember me.

Just after Tabitha died, the women of the community gathered to be with the disciple Tabitha. They gathered in an upper room. They washed and cared for her body,

preparing it for burial. They shared the clothing she had gifted to them, and they remembered her. Like the bread and the wine, these fabrics became symbols of resurrection power, threads of new life.

Here at our church, during Lent this year, a small group gathered each week for a time of Lenten Pause. This year our focus was on the spiritual gifts found in making crafts. We shared communion, prayed, and reflected on the spiritual, healing and creative power in crafting. Then we put our hands to work doing things like stringing beads, coloring, and sewing.

One of the weeks the group worked on these quilts you see displayed in the front of the sanctuary. A close-up picture of one is on your bulletin cover. Phyllis Windle donated the material from her beautiful collection of fabrics and a group of about a dozen women helped make these comforters as “Mission Quilts” to be donated to Lutheran World Relief. They will be delivered in June when volunteers from our church will go to New Windsor Service Center in New Windsor, MD. (You can read more about that opportunity in your bulletin if you would like to join in.) There, the quilts will be baled and wrapped to join many thousands more being shipped this year all around the world. They will be used wherever someone needs to — warm a bed, insulate a tent, partition a space, or wrap a baby — they are tangible, practical gifts to promote life.

The work of our hands in this fabric is a symbol of our lives bound up together with each other and reaching out to touch the larger world. These quilts, like the quilt my great-grandmother made, help me to understand the power of resurrection —the empowering gift of life that lives on even after death. How the faith of one woman or man can be woven into a larger story —intertwined with loved ones who have gone before and crafted into a story of hope that shapes the future.

Today we are the disciples — the *mathetes* and *mathetria* — who join with centuries of other disciples. In the spirit of the women who gathered with Tabitha, may we be empowered to share the handiwork of our lives and bring new life into the world. Amen.