

### **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.

### **John 10:22-30**

<sup>22</sup>At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, <sup>23</sup>and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. <sup>24</sup>So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." <sup>25</sup>Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; <sup>26</sup>but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. <sup>27</sup>My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. <sup>28</sup>I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. <sup>29</sup>What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. <sup>30</sup>The Father and I are one."

I wanted to introduce myself. My name is Tabitha. In case you don't know, my name translates into Greek to Dorcas. Perhaps you've heard of me by that name. My name means "Gazelle". In the Book of Acts where a very short part of my story is told, I'm called a *Mathetria*. This is what WE women Disciples were called. Of course, you know not much was left in the Bible about most of us women. And our stories were greatly shortened. (... Not enough space for the women, I guess) Ah! Those men. You know, sometimes they even took our names out and called us "The woman." The woman at the well. The woman with a hemorrhage. The woman in Adultery. Truth is, we ALL had names.

But I'm so glad to have run into you today so that I can tell you my story first hand.

I love to sew. I love working with beautiful fabric and sitting almost in meditation over the work that I do. I make clothing for people, mostly for widows. I make tunics and I make blankets so they will stay warm. I am very comfortable. I have plenty of food, a roof over my head and an occupation I love. You know how they say, "If you need help figuring out what to do with your life, think about the thing you most love spending time at, and do that." That's me with my sewing. I think it's important for those of us who have much to be willing to help those who have less.

And this is what I've devoted my life to. Most of what I make I give away. The widows have relied on me. In our society widows are outcasts. They can become very poor, and so I make it my business to help care for them. There are so many people who have such great need so I've always felt compelled to do something for them. I didn't ever know Jesus

personally, when he was here. But, I know well some of his closest companions. They're so old now, always being threatened because they, we insist on sharing what we know about Jesus. We can't help ourselves.

The most amazing thing happened to me though and I must tell you about it.

You see, I became very ill and the truth is that I actually died. You know all those stories you read and hear about walking toward the light? Yeah.... That's exactly what happened to me! But after a brief time, well it felt like a brief time to me, those around me who had been caring for me said it seemed like a very long time. But, Peter came, and his prayers to Jesus Christ broke through my visions. And I heard him say, "Tabitha, get up!" Well, when Peter speaks you listen, so I got up. They say I was blinking as I looked from face to face at the people around me. I was wet. I think they'd been bathing me..... for my funeral! Can you believe all this. I was actually a second resurrection! And I think me getting up from the dead helped to prove the power of the Holy Spirit in the work we were doing.

I was shown around to many people who couldn't believe that I was just fine; that I too had returned from the dead after Peter prayed to Jesus. And because people saw me more and more started to believe in The Way. More and more people come to learn about and have faith in Jesus Christ.

I devoted my life to sharing what I could with those who were in need. I had so much. I had more than I needed. Others were not so lucky; so blessed. Unfortunately, it is true that there are few people, few disciples or 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 living. We are willing to talk about “dying for Christ” but not risking our living for others. The world will never be a better place as long as the Tabitha’s (with adjustments for self-care) are few. And even if our bodies experience a resurrection in this life, like mine, even that resurrected body was a mortal one. Let’s pray that the Spirit of giving and of sharing will take on an immortality among the living. I used my privilege -- my 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.<sup>1</sup>

All sorts of miracles were recorded in the Book of Acts. There were healings and signs and visions. But mine is the first story of the miracle of New Life; of resurrection.

This passage begins with the words, “in Joppa there was a certain female disciple (*mathetria*) by the name of Tabitha, which being translated (into Greek) also means Dorcas.

Her life was full good (*agathos*) works (*erga*) and necessities for the poor (*eleemosunon*), which she herself provided” (Acts 9:36, my translation). Cornelius, the Roman centurion, also generously donated items to the people, which God noticed together with his prayers (Acts 10:2, 4). Both Tabitha and Cornelius understood, it seems, the flip side of privilege to be responsibility to those less privileged, including the colonized and marginalized. Tabitha bears the privilege and the burden of being the only named *mathetria* in the New Testament. The burden of being the first is the expectation of being a role model for all those that follow, to set the pace for future leaders. The first should impact the community from she emerged in positive, transformative ways, opening doors for others. To be among

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<sup>1</sup> Mitzi J. Smith. <http://www.workingpreacher.com>

the few or even the first on some level is marked by ambivalence. Such an honor and responsibility does not mean that there were not others, contemporary and before her, that should have been, could have been called *mathetria*. Sometimes timing is everything. Tabitha's story comes to us because of her death. Too often we only value the good works and gifts of others after they have spent their lives and/or die.

### **Full of good works, but not of the Spirit?**

There are no women in the Acts of the Apostles that are described as being full of the Holy Spirit. This may be because a natural consequence of being full of the Holy Spirit is the spoken prophetic word. The twelve apostles have usurped the authority over the spoken word for themselves, choosing six men (*aner*) full of the Spirit to wait on tables (Acts 6:1-6). The refusal of the author to explicitly attribute the filling of the Holy Spirit to women in Acts does not mean that God's Spirit did not fill them. In Acts, the Joel prophecy (2:28-32 LXX) is recontextualized or applied to "the last days" in which God is expected to pour out God's Spirit on women and men, slave and free (2:17-22). Yet even Philip's prophesying daughters are not said to be full of the Holy Spirit. But they are overshadowed and rendered ineffective by a male prophet named Agabus who traveled all the way from Jerusalem (21:10; cf. 11:28). Maybe it is all about the centralization of male power. So our text focuses on Tabitha's "good works".

How is one "full of good works"? Does it mean that Tabitha's entire life was dedicated to others, even at the expense of her own health? Often churches rely on the persistent work of a few women (or men) to fulfill the church's ministries. And those women are usually more mature women who have been convinced to be the woman who never complains. She expends all her time and resources for the benefit of others at the expense of her own well-being. Is this descriptive or prescriptive? It is one thing to draw strength from outside of one's self, from God and from people and things, to meet life's challenges. But to be expected to be a stereotypical "StrongWoman" or as Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes argues a "StrongBlackWoman" is quite another thing. The "StrongBlackWoman" rarely or ever says "no" or complains; everyone depends on her to step in when things go wrong. She seldom asks for help, and feels "compelled and empowered to serve others" endlessly. A "StrongBlackWoman" is not expected to break down, but remains an ostensible example of stalwart faith in the most painful circumstances. Thus, others seldom hear her cries because people expect her to handle everything life casts upon her.<sup>1</sup> God's Spirit will lead us to have balanced lives full of self-care as we care for others.

The author of Acts may not want readers to conflate the "in those days" at Acts 9:37 with "the last days" at Acts 2:17 when God will pour out God's Spirit on all flesh. But maybe critical readers should conflate the two. Because the six Hellenist men (deacons) chosen to wait on the tables in Act 6 are full of the Spirit, we are not surprised when Stephen preaches the longest sermon in Acts.

Yet, it is in “those days” that Tabitha becomes fatally sick. Just like all other human beings, *mathetrias* who are full of good and just acts become ill and die. It is a human rite of passage. The disciples (*mathetai*) in Joppa prepare her body and place it in an upper room (*hyperoon*). Not everybody had an upper room; a second floor room. The eleven disciples met in the upper room in Jerusalem waiting for a special gifting of God’s Spirit (Acts 1:13); I wonder if Tabitha made that trip and could have been among those women upon whom God’s Spirit rested that day? Wealthy homes, like some that can be seen among the ruins in Pompeii (the ancient Roman city destroyed and fossilized by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE/AD). Tabitha quite possibly was not a poor widow, but a single woman of some wealth among disciples of similar social status.

The disciples in Joppa, female and male, upon hearing that Peter is nearby, send two men to summon him (Acts 9:38). When Peter arrives in the upper room, mourners and beneficiaries of Tabitha’s just acts and gifts meet him at the door (9:39). Unfortunately, it is true that there are few people, few disciples or 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 living. We are willing to talk about “dying for Christ” but not risking our living for others. The world will never be a better place as long as the Tabitha’s (with adjustments for self-care) are few. And even if their bodies experience a resurrection in this life, like Tabitha’s, even that resurrected body was a mortal one. 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.

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## Commentary on John 10:22-30

[Elisabeth Johnson](#)

Throughout John’s Gospel, responses to Jesus vary widely.

This is the case once more in chapter 10. Jesus has been in Jerusalem since his arrival for the Festival of Booths in chapter seven (7:10), teaching regularly in the temple complex. His teaching evokes much discussion concerning his identity, origins, and authority, and results in a division among the people. Some believe that he is the Messiah, and others believe that he is demon-possessed, or worse, a blasphemer who deserves to die (7:40-44; 8:48, 59).

After the first part of Jesus' good shepherd discourse in John 10, there is a similar divided response: "Again the Jews were divided because of these words. Many of them were saying, 'He has a demon and is out of his mind. Why listen to him?' Others were saying, 'These are not the words of one who has a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?'" (10:19-21)

It is not clear how much time has passed between that discussion and the discourse that begins at John 10:22, which takes place at the time of the festival of the Dedication (Hanukkah). Once again Jesus is at the temple complex, this time in the portico of Solomon (10:23). Some Jews gather around him and ask Jesus to put an end to the debate concerning his identity once and for all: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly" (10:24).

The problem, of course, is that regardless of what Jesus says or does, the debate does not end. Jesus responds that he has already told them, and that the works he has done in his Father's name testify to him, but they do not believe, because they do not belong to his sheep (10:25-26).

The words and works of Jesus are open to many interpretations. The incident of the preceding chapter makes that abundantly clear. After Jesus heals a man born blind, the Pharisees see only that Jesus has healed on a Sabbath, and that therefore he must be a sinner, while others question how a sinner can perform such signs (John 9:16). The blind man gradually comes to realize who Jesus is and, in the end, worships him as Lord (9:38). Jesus says: "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind" (9:39).

There is a tension between God's initiative and human responsibility that is not resolved in John's Gospel (or perhaps in the entire Bible!). It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth concerning Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice and follow him, have been given to him by the Father (10:29). Everything depends on God's initiative. God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him (3:16-17). At the same time, the result of Jesus' coming into the world is that those who do not believe are subject to judgment (3:18-19).

The preacher cannot resolve this tension. Neither can the preacher argue people into faith with convincing words. (Even Jesus could not do that!) But the preacher can declare the promise that creates and sustains faith -- the promise of the Good Shepherd to give us eternal life, the promise that no one will be able to snatch us out of his hand (10:28).

The preacher can also help hearers discern the Shepherd's voice amidst all the other voices that clamor for our attention, many of whom claim to speak for God. Those voices are legion, but we do not always recognize how contrary they are to the voice of the Good Shepherd.

For instance, there are many voices that tell us how to grow closer to God: by having a prescribed religious experience, by believing the correct doctrine, by reaching a higher level of knowledge or a higher level of morality.

By contrast, the Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we are known by the shepherd: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28).

The voice of the Good Shepherd is a voice that liberates rather than oppresses. It does not say, "Do this, and then maybe you will be good enough to be one of my sheep." It says, "You belong to me already. No one can snatch you out of my hand." Secure in this belonging, we are free to live the abundant life of which Jesus spoke earlier in the chapter: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The abundant life of which Jesus speaks is not necessarily about abundance in years, or in wealth, or status, or accomplishments. It is life that is abundant in the love of God made known in Jesus Christ, love that overflows to others (John 13:34-35). It is eternal life because its source is in God who is eternal (17:3), and in Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life (11:25-26).

Amidst all the other voices that evoke fear, make demands, or give advice, the voice of the good shepherd is a voice of promise -- a voice that calls us by name and claims us as God's own.

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