

## **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."

## **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.

## **Ties that Bind May 12, 2019**

A teacher gave her class of second graders a lesson on the magnet and what it does. The next day in a written test, she included this question: "My full name has six letters. The first one is M. I pick up things. What am I?" When the test papers were turned in, the teacher was astonished to find that almost 50 percent of the students answered the question with the word Mother.

Today is Mother's Day, a day when we honor our Moms. We learn many things from our Moms. Here are some examples of things I found that people give their mothers credit for:

My mother taught me religion. She used to say things like, "You better pray that comes out of the carpet."

My mother taught me medicine: "If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they're going to freeze that way."

My mother taught me how to be a contortionist: "Will you look at the dirt on the back of your neck!"

My mother taught me to appreciate a job well done: "If you're going to kill each other, do it outside. I just finished cleaning!"

My mother taught me about genetics: "You are just like your father!"

My mother taught me logic: "Because I said so, that's why."

Maybe you learned similar things from your mother or father. I know I did. And while our reading today from the book of Acts has nothing to do with Mother's Day it speaks powerfully to me of the divine feminine presence in my life and the life of faith and I want to explore that a little bit and hope you will go along with me.

This reading about Tabitha really caught my imagination this week. I know I've read it many times but this week it was different. Maybe because it is Mother's Day, I don't know, and while the story may be more about Peter raising the dead, I was struck by the detailed descriptions of not only who Tabitha was but that her tunics and other clothing even get a mention. That is a remarkable detail for Luke to have included, don't you think? It highlights something important and I hope we are able to appreciate it today.

And those articles of clothing really got my attention. I think maybe because they speak to the memories we hold of people. And folks certainly remembered Tabitha's life of service and her tunics! These threads of memory and meaning that spoke of her life of faith and the connections they made to those who knew and loved her, who continued to wear her clothing. This reading also compels me to remember and honor the many women who have shaped and guided my faith and life. As well as recognize the powerful feminine aspects of God in our lives and in our church. You would be foolish not to see it.

I learned how to sew from my mother and my sisters. I can't remember a time when I couldn't repair a lost button or hem my own pants or stitch something up. I've even made a few shirts over the years that are now but a memory. I've worked in the costume shop as a theater major and am grateful for that particular skill. I learned how to knit from my grandmother who would have given Tabitha a run for her money. I've knit several scarves, some of which are still being worn. That's probably something you never thought you'd hear from your pastor.

I remember back in the 1980's I guess, my mother and sisters decided to take old clothing scraps of some of my siblings and turn them into quilts. It was sort of a fad back then. I didn't get one because I had left home long before then, but I remember seeing the ones she made for my younger brothers. They were filled with pieces of clothing that represented memories of most of their young lives. A bit of denim here. Some corduroy there. A particularly hideous shirt in the middle. They reminded me of Joseph's coat of many colors, a quilt full of memories both happy and sad. And my wife Anna still has childhood clothing that her mother and grandmother made for her when she was a small child. We have little dresses and aprons on display in places of honor in our house. Beautiful memories...threads, if you will, that bind her to her mother. Maybe you have some of these same memories in your life.

At my desk where I do most of my writing there hangs a beautiful little quilted cross that was made for me by the quilters at Crossnore Church. It reminds me of my connection not only to them, those wonderful women who made it, but to this great big messy thing, we call the church. This community of stumbling and joyous souls who call themselves sisters and brothers in Christ. Christ who binds us together, who speaks, and we hear his voice, who calls us like lost sheep, and we know his song. We also know that nothing can snatch us out of his hands. That we wear the tunics of his love as we move through the world caring and serving others; being clothed in Christ, as Paul says.

From her website called *Sermon Stories*, Jane Anne Ferguson offers stories for preachers that go along with the lectionary readings. This week she was inspired to write her own story and I want to share a portion of it because I think she really gets it. She called it "A Riff on the Raising of Tabitha" and she tells it like this.

"There is a community that gathers when someone dies, a community of mourners, a community of loved ones. When the good woman named Tabitha died all the women that she had helped, her community of friends that were like family, gathered to mourn her. Many of these women were widows who would have had no community except that Tabitha welcomed them into her home. She welcomed Jews and Gentiles alike. The Greeks called her Dorcas instead of the Hebrew name, Tabitha. She did not mind. As the women gathered, they reminded one another through their tears that both names meant, "gazelle." And hadn't Dorcas always been swift and graceful in welcoming a new woman, recently widowed, into her home?"

Hadn't Tabitha always been gentle, quiet and quick in bringing aid to anyone who needed it?

Don't you know that the women brought food? Though Tabitha had very little family the tables in her house were piled with fresh bread and fruit, with olives and dates, with special sweets rarely had at even wedding feasts, with stews of meat and vegetables, with cheeses. And there was good wine. Even the poorest of the widows brought something as simple as a small string of dates or a small pot of yogurt cheese.

And do you know what else these women brought? Cloaks, tunics, shawls, head scarves – clothing that Dorcas had made for them for she was a skilled with a needle and the art of sewing as she was with helping others. They stood around her in the upper room where her body was laid out comparing the beauty of her fine small stitches and the elegant simple lines of the patterns she cut. They marveled at where she found the time and the materials to make such garments and then to give them away.

Unbeknownst to some of the women, Tabitha was a disciple of the man Jesus of Nazareth, whom many now called the Risen Christ. She had learned to love God, love others and love herself as God's daughter through his teachings. As the women talked among themselves those who had known her best realized that none of them quite knew how Tabitha had known Jesus. Had she met him in person, heard him teach? Or had she simply heard the stories? All of them remembered her prayers before meals and her own stories repeating what she knew of Jesus and his parables. As they sat sewing in the evenings, she could spin a tale that left them all knowing they were loved, and that God had not forsaken any of them. Even those who did not know the teachings of the Jews and the stories of their God. Even those who knew little of Jesus or why his teachings shed new light on the Jewish faith.” ©Jane Anne Ferguson, 2019.

Perhaps there are other women in the bible or in your life that you might think of today who showed us how to be faithful disciples of Jesus. I remember Elizabeth, Mary Magdalen, Lydia or Martha, Joanna or the woman who reached out to touch the hem of Jesus' cloak, the woman at the well, the woman who washed his feet with oil, or Mary the mother of Jesus. All those faithful women who supported and followed him, who gathered the lowly and cared for the poor and lonely widows and neighbors. Tabitha stands out among them today not just because she was raised from the dead, (remember this is an Easter story), but because she used her simple gifts of needle and thread to bind together a community of love and care that the kingdom story might continue. Something we are supposed to be doing as well, especially in a time such as this.

*“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”  
“We share our mutual woes; our mutual burdens bear. And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”*

A few years ago, I heard a story about a group of women who made quilts for wounded soldiers and their families. One of the quilters, an older woman, brought with her a shirt that belonged to her late husband who was also a veteran and every time she made a quilt, she made sure to sew a small piece of her husband's shirt into each one of them. It reminded her that he lived on and became somehow, a part of the fabric of each of these other soldiers' lives. I found that to be so beautiful, and it certainly got me thinking not only about my life but all our lives really. How have we done the same with our gifts of love and care?

Today as we celebrate and remember the many women in our lives perhaps you will remember that you carry within you the small or maybe even large piece of the fabric of that life which has been metaphorically sewn into you. The fabric of love and acceptance, the cloth of compassion and understanding, the quilt of faithfulness and grace and joy. And even more really, is the realization that that is what has happened to us all in God. That we have all been sewn into the greater fabric of the life of God and the life of His children and the life to come. A beautiful quilt of life and grace and hope and peace. Something to think about for sure. Thanks be to God. Amen