

“Tabitha”**Rev. Maeve Hammond****Acts 9:36-43****11 May 2025**

I'd like to introduce you to my friend. Her name is Tabitha—I should say that's the Aramaic version of her name. Aramaic was Jesus's first language and has close ties to Hebrew. She also goes by Dorcas—kind of an unfortunate name, to be honest, but that's what the Greeks call her. Tabitha is a true pillar of her community. Did you know she hand-wove, stitched, and knit together the clothes of many of the women in her town, namely the widows? She lives in Joppa, which lies about 40 miles from Jerusalem on the coast. A lot of people make their money by seafaring, a dangerous job. There are a lot of widows in Joppa who have lost their trade and their lives on the sea. Tabitha is charitable, generous, loved by all. She's an irreplaceable individual in her community. She's also a believer and a Christ-follower. In fact, not to brag too much about my friend, but she's the only woman who's been called a disciple...yet. So, you could say she's a bit of a trailblazer, a game-changer. Oh, and I almost forgot this last part: she did die recently, but she was resurrected by this guy, the Apostle Peter. I wasn't there, but I heard it was pretty cool.

So, that's Tabitha, and she's the focus of our recommended lectionary reading this Sunday. Tabitha is truly an amazing figure, yet the New Testament treats her like a bit of a footnote to the history of the early Christ-followers. She's briefly mentioned in just one of the books of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles. Acts gives her a mere eight verses for such a profound life and story. And, we never actually hear her speak—Peter does the talking.

This is a little disappointing to me. I would have loved to have read a whole chapter, at least, on Tabitha. Not only is she the only female disciple named in the New Testament, but her story actually parallels Jesus in a few ways. Her resurrection is very similar to Christ's resurrection of a girl in the Gospel of Mark. The Mark passage even uses a word to describe the girl—talitha—that sounds a lot like Tabitha. Peter resurrects Tabitha in a very specific space that is

purposefully named in this passage: the upper room. *The upper room*. Do those words ring any bells to you? They may sound somewhat familiar if you kept up with your lectionary reading over Holy Week. The upper room is the place referred to where Jesus and his disciples shared the Last Supper. And, of course, we have the most obvious connection: the resurrection story. Remember, chronologically, Acts comes after the four Gospels and follows the lives of Christ-followers as they figure out what comes next after Jesus's death. Tabitha's story, like Jesus, is one of both love and resistance. Tabitha is a true caretaker for the vulnerable—women and widows. Some scholars posit that Tabitha was herself a widow, which makes the giving of her time and resources even more generous and impressive. Remember the call of the Hebrew prophets to value and care for the vulnerable? They typically always include widows in this larger community because they were often socially marginalized and financially unstable without the socio-economic protection of a husband in ancient times.

When preparing for this sermon, I'll admit that I felt a little confused and challenged. I knew I would be preaching on Mother's Day, and, at first glance, this passage really didn't seem like it fit into the theme. Why couldn't the lectionary suggest a passage on Moses's mother or Hannah or Elizabeth or the woman who asks Jesus to heal her daughter? Any of those surely would have been an easier and more logical fit for this Sunday. But, then, as I was reading some interpretations of Tabitha's story, I came across a quote by the scholar and Episcopal priest Rev. Dr. Wilda Gafney. She writes in her brief but very interesting commentary on Tabitha, "Meditations on life and love are very much at odds with the world in which they are being bound together into this set of Sunday readings" (*A Woman's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year B*). I'll read that again: "Meditations on life and love are very much at odds with the world in which they are being bound together into this set of Sunday readings" (*A Woman's Lectionary for the Whole Church: Year B*). We live in a time that may remind us of the struggles and heartbreak of the ancient Roman empire, the setting of the New Testament. Meditations on life

and love are a needed and sometimes hard-to-find antidote to a context that can, at times, feel rife with instability, unpredictability, loss, and powerlessness.

Tabitha's story reminds us of the life-giving qualities of the Gospels. Her story is about hope and resurrection into new life. It's all of these things—the brightness of her story—mixed into the harshness of her context, just as Rev. Dr. Gafney says. The Roman empire didn't really accept Christ-followers straying from the norms of their religion because they feared difference would threaten the enmeshment of Roman religious practices, social hierarchy, and political power. The Apostle Paul himself was imprisoned several times for his work to found early churches and openly support other Christ-followers. As previously mentioned, Tabitha aligned herself with some of the most vulnerable in her community, and she may have identified with widowhood, too. We know this because she clothed the widows, taking time and care to do this, yes. But, most strikingly, we know this because the widows of Joppa were there in the upper room with her. If they weren't with her when she died, they certainly were there after she had died. Acts implies that the widows washed, anointed, and prepared her body for burial—that's why Acts points them out repeatedly. This brings me to the largest and most universal shadow in the context of Tabitha's life: disease, death, and the fragility of the human body, particularly in a time before the reliable medical treatments (medications and vaccines) we take for granted today.

Yet, in all the difficulties of this context, Tabitha re-emerges into the world as a source of hope and renewal, echoing Christ's own resurrection. So, what can Tabitha teach us? Especially today, I'd invite us to think about Tabitha through the lens of motherhood. No, we don't know if she had children or a living family of her own, besides her chosen family of widows in Joppa in other Christ-followers. But, she exhibits and lives out a radical version of motherhood. She cares for, clothes, and gives support and comfort to her community. Her version of caretaking and parenthood are strong enough to live on beyond the context of political and social challenge and human frailty. Again, we find a parallel between Tabitha and Jesus here. Let's revisit the

quote from St. Julian of Norwich, which I read at the beginning of the service. This comes from the eleventh chapter of *Revelations of Divine Love*: “God almighty is our kindly Father and God all-wisdom is our kindly Mother [Christ], with the love and goodness of the Holy Spirit, which is all one God, one Lord... Where every ground of Motherhood begins....” *Where every ground of Motherhood begins.*

Tabitha is a disciple, meaning that we can assume Christ’s spiritual and social values strongly impact and shape her generosity and propensity for living into community care, radical hospitality, and subversive motherhood. When applied to both Christ and Tabitha, motherhood becomes ‘queered’--it defies social expectation. Motherhood transcends age, gender, and ‘normative’ family systems. Christ is mother of us all, according to St. Julian, and the source that lays the groundwork for the sacred love of motherhood in all its forms and varieties.

As we go on with our day today and the week ahead of us, I invite you to consider these questions: How do you define motherhood? How can you expand your definition of motherhood? Especially for those of us who don’t directly care for children in our everyday lives, how can we embody the characteristics of the type of motherhood Christ offers us and Tabitha exhibits for us? How can we prioritize community care in the aspects of sustainable giving, compassion, generosity, and caring for our neighbors with perhaps more vulnerable identities than the ones we hold? Friends, let’s go forward, in the spirit of Christ and his mother, Mary, and Tabitha and her community of the widows of Joppa to serve and love our neighbors, thereby serving and loving God. Amen.