

Sermon: "Good Shepherd Sunday "

John 10:22-30 Easter 4 (C)

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Every Monday, several women gather in a small room at the top of the stairs. The rhythmic buzzing of sewing machines, the carefully laid out swatches of fabric sewn together to form a 'one-of-a-kind geometric pattern and the exchange of conversation fill the room. The women have gathered together to quilt for many years. They know each other's stories and struggles. And they know there is a bigger story beyond their individual stories.

You see, as these women gather, they diligently create quilts for people they will never know and stories they will never hear. The people who receive these quilts are oftentimes people struggling with poverty or living in conditions that would appall most of us. The quilts also serve as emergency comfort for those in the midst of natural disasters - where homes have been destroyed, family members have been lost or worse, have been swallowed up by death. And these women... know death too well. You see...many of them are widows. And I find it very touching that when one of *these* women succumbs to death themselves, a display of personal quilts is displayed at the funeral. Because you see, each quilt has a story behind it - and these women often *know* that story.

And so it is with the woman in our story from Acts today. The woman's name is, Tabitha or Dorcus, in Greek - also translated as: ma(thee)tria [mathetria], disciple; one who follows and is influenced by the example of another. I surmise Tabitha knew a bigger story than that of her own. But here we are, the fourth week of Easter and a beloved woman, the writer describes her as one devoted to good works and acts of charity. In all honesty, I would have liked to know more about Tabitha but at the onset of the story Tabitha is ill and dies. That's all we get about who Tabitha is...or is it?

I find it ironic that here we are, in the fourth week of Easter, and once again confronting a story about death. Grief is lingering in the air and the women in our story today are struggling to make sense of it. William Loader says that stories of raising the dead to extend their lives before they die at a later stage easily evoked notions of resurrection, though it was understood as more than temporary reprieve. They also symbolize hope. The good news is about bringing life where there is death, love where there is hate, healing where there is brokenness.

Now I'm pretty sure this wasn't the first thing on the hearts and minds of the women who were grieving, but it does indicate the vital importance of connection, relationship and identity. What mattered most to the weeping women in our story today - the ones who prepared Tabitha's body for burial and lovingly showed Peter the clothing she had made - was...love. The love they had for their dear friend and the love they had for one another as they gathered in life...and in death.

Now we have no way of knowing if there was such a raising of the dead, but many remarkable things happened and this may have been one of them. But what is of great importance here, is "who" Tabitha was and "what" she did on behalf of her community. A community, perhaps, filled with common people. Luke tells us very little about her personal life and as I said earlier...I would have liked to know more about her. Was she single, married, widowed or divorced? Did she have children? What was her family of origin? We don't know. But what we do know, is that she was a seamstress and used her gifts to design tunics and clothing for those who lived on the margins of society...the poor, the widowed...and perhaps, the outcast.

She clothed...*them*. She clothed...*those* people. And I surmise, that the relationships which were formed within the community with whom she served, were life-giving. She met the needs of the people right where they were and her death left a gaping hole in the community. Tabitha, you see, had a relationship with *love*. And just as the psalmist did, she *knew* the shepherd's voice. Shepherd us O God, beyond our wants, beyond our needs, from death into life. Tabitha was anointed with the oil and goodness and kindness followed her - pursued her - all the days of her life. And as Tabitha's name, *mathetria*, suggests, she was a disciple of Jesus. She belonged to a movement that became her identity. An identity that gives us a window into who she was, what she did and who she followed. It describes her character and her grieving friends knew this.

I often wonder if that space, that gaping hole which accompanies death, might oftentimes leave us without direction, or purpose. There is something about death that shifts our identity in one form or another. Death not only severs the physical connection we have to another, but also the intimacy of relationship as well. Loss of the familiar can keep us at a distance from others, ourselves...and from life itself. The friends of Tabitha knew this reality all too well and quite frankly, so do we. Many of us have lost loved ones all too soon. We reminisce about their lives and we sometimes show what things their hands created or how they served their community. Or we struggle to make sense out of the senseless killing of thousands of people at the hands of misguided leaders who know nothing of what it means to be lead by the shepherd who loves beyond the walls, borders, nationalities, religions and socio-economic disparities.

In the gospel reading from John today, Jesus is challenged by the Jewish leadership/the debaters who are asking for a straightforward answer about whether or not he is the Messiah. And they don't want to be kept in the dark. No more suspenseful waiting. A cut and dried answer is what they were looking for but it is not a plain answer that they receive from Jesus. "The works I do in my Father's name, testify to who I am. Not works to advance the mighty and elevate the rich, but works for the sake of advancing the kingdom of God, here and now. Jesus reminds those who have encircled him and who are trying to trick him that who He is...who we are...in the body of Christ - matters. And whose we are...matters. You see the sheep who hear *this* shepherd's voice and follows him, will never be taken from the fold because they will come to know what really matters in life. And no one, can take (snatch) that away.

Not contentious debate, not devastating circumstances, not our differences...not even death - can sever the intimate connection to the one who calls out our name and comes to us as the voice of love. It is the touch of the one who loves us beyond our fears, disappointments, broken dreams, financial difficulties, racial indifferences, irrational leadership and devastating laws which tear families apart and leave people stranded at borders, in prisons and in food lines. It is the one who says, open your eyes, sit up and take my hand. It is the one whose hand ushers us off the bed and says, continue the work you have begun.

I am thankful for the women in my life who have offered their touch when my life was in disarray. This is Mother's Day weekend...and I miss my mother and my aunts - the ones who grieved with me and lifted me up. But guess what...those women in the upper room, the ones who cut, and sew, and tie the threads that weave together the quilts to comfort to all in need...those women are the plain and simple answer that Jesus offers to every tribe, every nation and every people. It's the plain and simple response that he offers us today, too. The intimacy and relationship that we share with one another in the midst of our struggles is a sacred connection, and a stark reminder of the interconnectedness of God. Amen.