

Please Call Her What She Is!
A Homily and Discussion for Sardis Baptist Church
Bob Stillerman
Acts 9:32-42
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The Story of Dorcas – NRSV

32 Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers,* he came down also to the saints living in Lydda. 33There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralysed. 34Peter said to him, ‘Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!’ And immediately he got up. 35And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. 36 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. 37At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38Since 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.’ 39So 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. 40Peter 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. 41He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

Historical Background – Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun, Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*

In scripture, Dorcas, whose name means “gazelle,” is called “disciple” – the only occurrence in the New Testament of the feminine form of the word. She lived northwest of Jerusalem at the port of Joppa, an important early center of Christianity as the faith spread across the Mediterranean. There, grieving widows looked out longingly at the sea that had claimed their sailor husbands, and the destitute scavenged on the shore for bits of rags.

Dorcas was moved to compassion by their plight. She began sewing clothes for the poor, offering all out of her generosity. She made tunics and coats, which served not only for warmth, but as mats for the homeless poor to sleep on at night. Sometimes a tunic was all a widow had. Dorcas’ home was a center for mercy and hope. When she died, the grieving was widespread and heartfelt; a beloved saint had been lost.

The Story in Culture:

Dorcas
George MacDonald

If I might guess, then guess I would
That, mid the gathered folk,
This gentle Dorcas one day stood,
And heard when Jesus spoke.

She saw the woven seamless coat-

Half envious, for his sake:
'Oh, happy hands,' she said, 'that wrought
The honoured thing to make!'

Her eyes with longing tears grow dim:
She never can come nigh
To work one service poor for him
For whom she glad would die!

But, hark, he speaks! Oh, precious word!
And she has heard indeed!
'When did we see thee naked, Lord,
And clothed thee in thy need?'

'The King shall answer, Inasmuch
As to my brethren ye
Did it-even to the least of such-
Ye did it unto me.'

Home, home she went, and plied the loom,
And Jesus' poor arrayed.
She died-they wept about the room,
And showed the coats she made.

Homily:

I want you to imagine a person. This person was a writer, but more than just a writer. This person, at a very young age, decided to take seriously Matthew's charge to be an advocate for the *least of these*. This person started a newspaper, and a network of hospitality houses, and eventually, a movement to empower the working class, and provide for the needs of America's most poor and vulnerable citizens.

Her name was Dorothy Day. And she's been called a saint, and even a Communist. But in all my readings, I've never seen her called a minister or disciple.

Let's imagine another person. This person spent a lifetime working in the slums of Calcutta, taking a vow of poverty, and nursing India's sick and dying.

Her name was Teresa. And she's been called sister and mother and saint, but again, I've never seen her called a minister or a disciple. In her Wikipedia biography, the article says she has been praised for her "many acts of charity," but not ministry.

Some years ago in Joppa, a widow by the name of Dorcas devoted her life to the widows in her neighborhood. She made them cloaks and tunics, and she saw to it that each woman had what she needed. And though the text never tells us, don't you imagine that each garment came with a special story, or a prayer, or an encounter with its recipient? After all, Dorcas wasn't a factory or a distribution center. It seems to me that she would have asked about the needs of her neighbors, and shown individual care and attention for each case. In other words, she would have used her gifts in a way that

made God's love and God's presence apparent and available to others. Dorcas wasn't a check-stroker, she was a relationship-builder.

But some stories never change...

Gail O'Day writes that Dorcas is the only woman in the New Testament to be referred to as a "disciple" (*mathetria*). But for some reason, Dorcas' work is actually compared to that of philanthropist or donor – she is said to do "acts of charity" or "almsgiving" or "good works." And once again, Dorcas is unique – this is the only part of Acts where service is described in this manner.

When the Jerusalem church began, the twelve apostles appointed seven deacons from among their growing number of disciples. You'll remember that many of the men in the church were concerned about everyone being fed – lots of widows were being neglected. The disciples were appointed for the specific purpose of attending to these neglected widows. And Luke calls their service "ministry."

So what gives? When men take care of widows they are disciples doing ministry. When women do the same, more even, they are qualified as women disciples who are doing good works.

Unfortunately for us, the scriptures were written in a time where systems of patriarchy whitewashed or altogether removed the accomplishments of women, and especially women who were early church leaders. But we don't have to be held captive to such a system.

In Dorcas, we find a woman, who despite patriarchal writers' best efforts, remains vibrant. Like Miriam before her, Dorcas' death requires an entire community to pause and take note of her life. And the leader of her community, Peter, rushes to offer her comfort. And in this case, the text preserves the moment. Most women of the time received no more than a footnote, and many times, they weren't even given the dignity of a name. Dorcas has ten verses! And find me a Baptist church that doesn't have a Dorcas class, or a group of sewers who keep her memory alive.

Here's another thing. I've been in churches all my life. And if you wanna tell me that any of these places could do the things they have done, and do, and will continue to do without the women who fill their pews, then I've got a bridge to sell you in Arizona! Don't be fooled. Women were just as integral to the earliest churches as they are today. And no writer, past nor present, can undo such a truth.

Here's why stories like Dorcas' are important. We need to hear that ministers, people called by God, either professionally or in a lay capacity, come in all shapes and sizes. As a matter of fact, I think we need to hear people without titles like pastor or deacon or elder be acknowledged for the ministry they do.

Guess what? When you use your gifts to love and serve other people, you are being a minister. If you are a little girl who sings with joy, you are a minister! If you are a teenage girl who helps Baby Boomers learn how use social media, you are a minister! If you are a young mother who tells her children the stories of Jesus, you are a minister! If you are an old woman who offers our congregation your wisdom, you are a minister! If you crunch numbers, or sew, or do yardwork, or cook supper, or pray, or sing in choir, or write letters, or act like a friend, or visit the sick, or hand out bulletins, or do any activity, all in the desire to further God's beloved community....Guess what!?! You are a minister!!!

God has ordained such a thing. And no ancient writer, no certifying body, no long-winded preacher, no cartoonish cable news host can deny you such a status. And here at Sardis, we hold ourselves accountable to a noble pursuit: to search for, to acknowledge, to affirm, and to empower the spirit-filled gifts of all those who seek to be ministers -- however that might look.

So today, good friends, remember Dorcas. Remember her desire to love and serve others. For if we follow her legacy, we may one day finally create a world where both *mathetis* and *mathetria* do something called ministry.

May it be so. And may it be soon!