

While I was a student at Wake Forest Divinity School, I was fortunate to have Phyllis Tribble as a professor for several classes. Her work pioneered feminist perspectives in Biblical scholarship. In her work, Dr. Tribble combines a steadfast respect for ancient texts with a determination to give women equal voice. She has a remarkable way of noticing details that matter.

She often speaks of Miriam, Moses' sister. In the final redaction of Biblical texts that are available to us in 2022, Dr. Tribble tells us that Miriam is the only woman of whom we hear details of her whole life: as a young person, as an adult, as a seasoned adult, and of her death, and events beyond her death. We know she helps Moses to safety. We know she is a warrior who dances after the defeat of the Egyptians. We know she is a trusted advisor to Moses in the wilderness. We know her people wait for her recuperation from illness before resuming travel. We know of her death. We know how her people celebrated and acknowledged her life.

Miriam is the exception, and even still, editors diminish her presence. In most instances, stories of women in our texts relate to marriage and birth. We hear very little of characters like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Hannah, and Ruth after they have been married and mothered sons. In the rare instances where we hear accounts of women beyond familial roles, the wisdom of Debra, the courage of Esther, the determination of the Daughters of Zelophehad, we certainly don't hear additional details of their birth, death, or lasting influence. For comparison, we can chronicle the life stages of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, Samson, and even Boaz with ease, not to mention Jesus and John the Baptist.

It's really important for us to remember that the patriarchy's intentional attempts to exclude the accomplishments and contributions of women in written form does not erase those accomplishments and contributions. Ours is a faith rooted in the strength, love, and truth of women. They were there. They live in the spaces between the text, and they live in our hearts and minds.

Remember also that wealth in these times was passed only to male heirs of Jewish mothers. Such a system not only ensured the power and privilege of men, but also limited the spheres of influence for women – it threatened their full sense of humanity.

The Second Testament has its flaws as well, but we do begin to see some subtle shifts. Our Easter texts reminded us of women, who also happened to be mothers, who supported, followed, and bore witness to the events of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It is their strength and conviction that will pave the way for their dismissive male counterparts to eventually experience Easter for themselves. And it is their faithful witness that makes ours possible.

And today's text is even better. Dorcas, or Tabitha, is mentioned as a disciple. Gail O'Day notes she is the only woman to be explicitly mentioned as a disciple in Acts, and the only one in the whole of the Second Testament to be characterized in the feminine form. Dorcas ministers to widows by providing for their needs: she makes them clothes, she offers emotional, physical, and financial support. She is a matron in a world full of patrons. She is a revered leader in her community, so revered that when she dies, the community sends two men to go and find Peter. She is surrounded by women who weep for her. And in raising Dorcas' body and spirit, Peter demonstrates the power and presence of God. Dorcas is SO credentialed, SO faithful, SO

important that her death commands the pause of her community, and her revival is a lasting gospel expression. Dorcas, like Miriam before her, is a leader and provider whose leadership and provisions transcend systemic and structural norms.

And isn't that a theme of Easter? God doesn't create people in the image of systems. God creates people in order that their gifts, expressed in their own unique ways, might transform the world: created beings, living in shared creation, reshaping and reimagining God's possibilities.

We're also engaging this text on a Mother's Day Weekend that happens to align with an unprecedented news event: the pending reversal of Roe v. Wade. Once again, our text is timely.

Today, and every day, we give thanks for those people who have mothered us, and all those who exhibit mothering qualities. Some have been our birth parents. Others have offered invaluable nurture and support.

It's my assumption that Miriam and Dorcas had children of their own, though I cannot say for sure. I assume this, because our texts often go to great pains to tell us when women are not birth mothers. In these patriarchal stories, there's a cruel irony: a woman's value is wholly attached to progeny. But women are rarely celebrated for progeny. It's an expectation and duty, and their bodies and lives become vessels. It's as if motherhood is the only thing to say about them, and the topic has a limited shelf life. And of course, this creates a culture of intense shame for women, who for whatever reason, cannot or choose not to have children.

But not today. Dorcas is the kind of mother whose mothering transcends the idea of motherhood. I would imagine that motherhood was central to her identity, but not exclusive to her identity. Dorcas was first and foremost a child of God, and that was the basis for her value. And she expressed her value in various roles which included disciple, leader, and friend, not to mention mother.

On this Mother's Day, I look around this room, and I am grateful for mothering figures of all expressions who keep bringing life into this place. Yes, some of you have literally given us breath, but that's not all you have given. You are teachers, and proclaimers, and artists, and strategists, and marketers, and consultants, and financial advisors, and counselors, and activists, and volunteers, and friends, and disciples, and a thousand other things, too. And each and every day, in your own unique and spirited ways, you bring life into this place!

And days like today aren't always easy, because for some of us, we are reminded of the mothering figures or children we've lost, or never had, or we grieve the opportunities for mothering that have eluded us. Once more, I think the story of Dorcas is reminder of God's resurrecting possibilities: an old widow using her gifts to offer mothering love to widows longing for and needing motherly provisions. And there's no divine intervention needed to give Dorcas this mothering quality. As a matter of fact, the only mention of divine intervention is in reference to preserving the life of Dorcas so that others can keep experiencing her mothering.

And that brings me to my final point. Yes, the arc of our scriptures, and indeed Jesus himself, point to the sanctity of life. Every life is indeed valuable because it is created in God's image. But Jesus also invited, and I would say commanded us, to live, and live abundantly. That is to

say, a person's sanctity is not limited to the beginning of life, but actually extends throughout all of their living. The mothering love of Miriam and Dorcas didn't end at birth. Miriam didn't just wait for Moses to survive genocide, she made sure he was provided for, and she stayed close by even when he'd gone to live with Pharaoh's daughter. And she gave mothering love to her little brother her whole life long, including the tough advice he didn't like. Dorcas saw everyone as a child of God, even widows advanced in age.

There will be any number of Christians today who proclaim that a ban on abortion is gospel expression, because it guarantees the sanctity of life. But I would argue that such a ban is sanctity without abundance.

Jesus compels us to seek and recognize the value of every neighbor. That's the sanctity part. Then, Jesus bids us to live and practice empathy, in order that we might honor God and neighbor. How has God created you? What's happening in your life? What needs and concerns might you have? How might I align my life to reflect love for you and accept your love for me? And together, how might we be partners in God's story, and together, experience God's provisions and possibilities? That's the abundant living part.

To my knowledge, most of the Christians fighting SO hard to ban abortion have yet to show the same vigor in demanding abundance for the unborn lives they seek to honor and protect. Are we ready to provide for every child? Are we ready to offer stable housing, healthcare, education, nutritious meals, authentic community, and other structures and support to secure a life of abundance? Are we ready to stop equating wealth with morality? Are we ready to invest in policies, infrastructure, and cultures that protect women? Are we ready to create a world where motherhood does not represent a direct threat

to the physical, emotional, social, political, economic, and religious health and wellbeing of every woman?

Sanctity of life extends to both mother and child. And God's expectation, indeed God's deeded right for abundant living does too. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, mostly because we are human rather than divine beings, every life is different, and experiences its own unique challenges. Sometimes there's danger to the mother, sometimes the child, sometimes both. Sometimes there are circumstances that can only be guided by individual conscience. And in such instances, impossible choices must be made. I believe that giving every mother the autonomy to make these difficult choices is congruent with our faith. It is humane. It is empathetic. It is faithful.

To offer choice is to reject the fallacy of ancient editors who only saw women as vessels to a particular end. To offer choice, is to assert an unyielding Easter hope that God's presence can bring healing and resurrection to the most broken and wounded parts of our lives. To offer choice, is to honor motherhood itself.

I do not know what the future holds, but I know it will require the persistent faith and ministry of mothering figures like Miriam and Dorcas. May God grant us the power to both give and receive a mothering love that mimics theirs in the days and weeks to come. Amen.

**Mothering Love**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Fourth Sunday of Easter, 5/8/2022**  
**Acts 9:36-43**



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