

Easter 4

25 April 2010

St. Anne's Episcopal Church

Lee's Summit, Missouri

Acts 9:36-43

Come, Holy Spirit, come. Take my lips and speak with them. Take our minds and think with them. Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you. In Christ's name, we ask it. Amen.

Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.

It's one of the stories I vividly remember from my Sunday School days. I loved this story. Maybe I loved it because it was about a woman who was a disciple, and there didn't seem to be many of those when I was in Sunday School.

Or, maybe I loved it because Dorcas was the name of the sweet lady who lived up the road from our house. She was the lady who cut my hair when I was a little girl, and she was the only person I'd ever known named Dorcas. Maybe that is what gave me a personal connection to this story about Dorcas the disciple.

Whatever it was, I loved this story. And, as I read and studied this story as I prepared for this sermon, I found that I loved it even more.

The story of Dorcas, as we've heard it this morning, is from the ninth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, a book written by the same author who wrote Luke's Gospel.

It is a book that describes the development of the early Christian community in the years following the resurrection of Christ. It is a book that describes the work of the Holy Spirit, unleashed in the world on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection. It is a book that describes the work of that Spirit as it formed and shaped and led this new Christian community.

What can we learn about the Spirit's work and the early Christian community from the story of Dorcas? What might we learn about the Spirit's work and the Christian community in our own day from the story of Dorcas?

Dorcas was a pillar of the Christian community in Joppa, a town on the Mediterranean coast of Palestine. She was someone designated in the scripture as a disciple, the first and only use of the feminine form of the Greek word for disciple in the Christian scriptures. She was someone who was well-known for her good works and acts of charity.

It is likely that Dorcas was a widow. And, since widows without a male to care for them were among the most vulnerable and poor in that society, it is also likely that Dorcas had opened her home to other Christian widows, forming a household of widows ministering to and caring for one another. From the story, we also know that Dorcas must have been a gifted seamstress, because she had made highly valued clothing for the widows around her.

But, one day Dorcas the disciple got sick and died. Her death was a huge blow to the Christian community in Joppa, such a blow that they sent two men from the community with the urgent request that Peter come to Joppa right away.

Peter came and went up to the room where they had laid her body. The widows were there in the room with her, crying and mourning and showing Peter the clothing that Dorcas – this beloved saint of the community - had made for them, sharing the remembrances they still had of her, the symbols of her compassion and love for them, and wanting Peter to see these gifts she had left with them.

Then, Peter sent the mourners outside. He prayed and called out to Dorcas, and she opened her eyes and sat up. And, her return to her community was met with great rejoicing.

I love this story so much because it tells us some important things about Christian community, the community formed, shaped, and led by the Holy Spirit in first century Palestine and in our own day.

Two points seem to be apparent about Christian community.

First, it is a caring community. Especially in our own day, when true community is hard to find sometimes, in a culture where we tend to value our privacy and to honor rugged individualism, Christian community pulls us together, draws us in, connects us, and allows us to wade into each other's lives in ways that can only be described as transformative.

Weeping together when there is sorrow, hoping together when there is anticipation, celebrating together when there is joy and happiness. Enabling us to overcome our intense need for privacy and our desire to be strong, tough individualists who want to give the impression that we can do everything on our own. Allowing us to be vulnerable and tender with one another, to admit that we do need one another and that none of us can do this thing called the Christian life on our own.

Dorcas' life and ministry in the community were all about caring. Sharing her gifts and talents with those around her. And, the community cared right back. Staying together in their sorrow when their sister in Christ died, calling on all the spiritual resources they had available to them. Rejoicing together when their sister was returned to them well and whole.

Christian community is a deeply caring community where we can invest ourselves in one another and in our common life together. Where we can be vulnerable and safe, all at the same time.

Second, it is a community where unlikely people do even more unlikely things. It is a community in which we don't have to be confined to the places, the rigid boxes, where society can sometimes place us; it is a community where we are free to live in the fullness God created us to live in.

Christian community is a place where a woman, a widow, named Dorcas could be a true disciple – a designation usually made for people with names like Peter and John and James.

It is a place where an uneducated fisherman named Peter could leave his fishing nets behind, follow a Galilean peasant named Jesus, and become one of the leaders of a movement that would literally change history.

Caring community. Unlikely people doing even more unlikely things. Formed, shaped, led by the Holy Spirit unleashed at Pentecost like a mighty wind and flames of fire

You have to love this story, don't you?

Now, I want to end today by pointing out the last line of our story about Dorcas the disciple. You see the end of the story tells us that Peter stayed on in Joppa for awhile after the miraculous healing of Dorcas. We are even told where he stayed. It was in the home of "a certain Simon, a tanner."

Almost sounds like a throw-away piece of information, doesn't it? Two thousand years after the fact, why do we possibly need to know and why do we care where Peter stayed in Joppa?

But, wait a minute. A certain Simon, a tanner. Peter, a good observant Jew, was staying in the home of a person whose occupation was considered unclean.

You see. the Holy Spirit is still at work in this story. Still at work with Peter. Still at work with the Christian community. Still at work with us.

Stay tuned. Next week, the story of Christian community continues...

Alleluia. Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.