

“Garments of Grief, Garments of Gladness”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

May 8, 2022

Acts 9:36-43

John 10:22-30

A couple of weeks ago, I got a call in the grocery store. It was from a church member, and since this member doesn't typically call unless it's something urgent, I answered with some level of concern that something wrong might have happened.

But the voice on the other end was a glad one. Erica was calling me, and it was with urgent joy. Some time before, Erica had asked me if I could recommend a place to donate some new clothes that had been purchased for her daughter, which weren't needed after all. I suggested Never Alone Again, an organization in Teaneck which works with women who are survivors of domestic violence. I've been to one of their events before, and met several young moms, and saw how they were mentored by older women to share wisdom and find joy, spiritual underpinnings to the practical resources they offer to give women childcare and other resources to help them find that they can be independent from their abuser, but not alone in making that happen.

It turns out, Erica had stopped by to drop off the clothes— and had spent most of the day at Never Alone Again. “Did you know they have a whole store where women can come and pick out what they need for themselves and their kids, for free?” Erica had stuck around to volunteer, helping to arrange the clothes in the store. As I spoke to her in the produce aisle of the grocery store, I pictured her in the middle of Never Alone Again's store, adding her caring touch to arrange the clothes in ways that might appeal to the women who would be browsing there.

As I read the Acts passage, my mind returned to Erica, surrounded by clothes. Tabitha— also known by her Greek name, Dorcas— was resourceful— and generous— with needle and thread, so much so that all those gathered around her when she died wept while they showed off the tunics and other clothing she had made for them. The Orthodox Church recognizes Tabitha as the patron saint of seamstresses and tailors; Acts describes her as a disciple— the same word used for the 12 followers of Jesus. We get the sense that Tabitha was the heart of the community around her: a community of widows, cared for by works of good deeds and charity. In those days, widowhood rendered women into a social caste which often left them without voice, property, or means of supporting themselves. But Tabitha, who Acts described as a disciple, created an alternative community of care, where these women could hold and support one another as they figured out what life beyond loss would mean for them.

I like to think that doing these acts of service and forming a vibrant community out of people who had lost so much personally in society gave Tabitha the kind of joy that I heard in Erica's voice when she called me while I was shopping in the grocery store. I'm pretty sure it did. I also

wonder if it depleted her: giving so much, and tending to the needs of the poor and widows, a practice that society had not done its duty to fulfill. The laws in the Torah, particularly in Deuteronomy, demand justice and financial care for the widows and the poor as a requirement for following God.

You see, I am conflicted. Part of me wants to tell you to **be more like Tabitha**. Be the one who can draw a community together, clothing it with care. I could stop there. That would be a good sermon, possibly a really good one. And, I know some of you already are like Tabitha.

But I also wonder if Tabitha got so worn out by doing good works, by feeling like these lives rested on her shoulders alone, on top of her own grief if she was a widow too, exhausted her. We don't know why Tabitha died, but maybe the stress of holding together so much need wore on her heart.

I find it interesting that after Peter arrived on the scene, he sent everyone outside. I wonder what he did or said as he revived Tabitha to life. Scripture reports he knelt down, prayed, and turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up!" much like Jesus said to the little girl, Jairus' daughter, who had died: "*Talitha, koum*— little girl, get up!." But I wonder, as part of raising Tabitha, if Peter somehow also freed her from the burden of holding an entire community on her shoulders, on her own. I like to fantasize that Peter committed the other disciples— this time, the guys, as well as the growing church around them— to help do this work of service Tabitha was holding, even beyond her body's limits.

As we mark this day as Mother's Day, I am aware of the tendency to put women who serve and sacrifice on a pedestal. We admire and show our appreciation. But we do not always think about how we can best support the work of bearing and/or raising children. I would like to see, instead of admiration and appreciation, a wider and more impactful support of the lives of those who bear or raise children, and for their children too. This week, I am reminded of how important reproductive **choice** is for that support, so that people can plan when and whether to bear children. How about if we could see an end to violence against women? At our Oelhaf House Board meeting last week, we learned that the Center for Hope and Safety is getting more calls than ever before from people seeking a safety plan. They can't find shelter or apartments for these women fast enough. What if our community could offer affordable housing and childcare in ready supply? How about mental health care, including addiction and recovery services?

I know lots of Tabithas out there, and they always give me hope: people who are offering counseling services, people who are educating children or young adults; people who are making phone calls to help immigrants get through a bureaucracy, people tending to the sick, visiting those in prison, people even sharing their own homes to help the unhoused. But I also think that our society needs to do more than what a few saintly Tabithas can offer.

As I prepared this sermon, I kept feeling drawn to a short story by Kentucky author Wendell Berry, called "Stand By Me." In it, the narrator describes the deep grief his brother experiences

after the death of his wife, and how that impacted his nephews too. What the narrator offers is life-giving in the midst of death.

“When Tom and Nathan needed him the most, their daddy didn’t have much to offer. He wanted them around, he would watch over them when they were with us at work, he would correct and caution them when they needed it, but how could he console them when he couldn’t console himself?

They were just little old boys. They needed their mother, was who they needed. But they didn’t have her, and so they needed me. Sometimes I’d find one or the other of them off somewhere by himself, all sorrowful and little and lost, and there’d be nothing to do but try to mother him, just pick him up and hold him tight and carry him around a while. Their daddy couldn’t do it, and it was up to me.”

One life-giving power of the church is that, just as it bears witness to the empty burial cloths that signified the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church can show a community how to move from garments of grief to garments of gladness. We do that by modeling a culture of care, and extending it beyond our walls and roles that feel familiar, so that it takes shape over an entire community and beyond. That may mean taking on a role that does not feel familiar to you, such as an uncle *mothering* his nephews. A culture of care may mean political advocacy that forms healthy systems and networks that care, so that when individuals reach the extent of their capacity to give, there is still something more that the community can offer. A culture of care may mean ***sometimes taking care of yourself*** when you feel depleted, and letting others know that is what you are doing, or even asking for help for your own care. The week after this week, I will be traveling to Denver for a continuing ed conference, about preaching and ministry in the face of trauma. Knowing how these past 2 years plus have impacted us all, I look forward to having some more resources in my stock of care. I still believe there is more than enough care in the world to go around. We just need to work on our distribution system.

I want to return to the urgent joy with which Erica called me a few weeks ago, to tell me a piece of good news. That is the kind of joy that breathes life into worn-out bodies and tired systems. It is a joy that our church is good at cultivating, so let’s try to cultivate it beyond our walls. It is a joy that has seen despair, but also resurrection, so has the faith to call us to “Get up!” It is a joy that comes from following Jesus Christ. May you be recipients of that joy, and even makers of it, today and always.