

Called to Serve

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

The church is called to be a place of refuge for the hurting and the helpless. And yet, on this bright May morning, what do you do if you are not currently hurting and helpless? What if your life is going well and you have a sense of self-contentment and satisfaction? Well, that's when the church must be a place of vocation for the strong and the proficient.

Today's text from the Acts of the Apostles is about the death of a beloved member of the early church—Tabitha. In a few verses, we are moved from a scene of great grief to one of astounding joy as Peter comes in and commands, "Tabitha, arise!" She is restored to life, and the community is moved from sadness to joy. Surely, it's meant to be a kind of Easter story as we are moved from grief, mourning, and death to life, new life as the church moves from a sect of Judaism to a type of faith journey that embraces the whole world.

And yet, perhaps because this is one of the few places in the New Testament that a woman is featured, I find myself drawn to the figure of Tabatha. We aren't told much about her, but what we are told says a great deal.

Tabatha is beloved. Why? Because she makes clothes for people in need. When Peter arrives, the recipients of Tabatha's generosity show the garments to him as tangible evidence of her goodness. Moreover, Tabatha's body is in an upper room, suggesting the possibility that she is a person of means, someone who can afford a two-story house, which wasn't the case with many homes in that part of the world in that day.

So, it's a story about the life-giving power of the risen Christ being transferred to one of Christ's apostles, Peter, and it's a story about life-giving power emanating from the good works of a woman. Tabatha is someone who, in her generosity and good works has probably moved lots of

people in need from death to life, given them hope when they thought they were at a dead end.

In many sermons the gospel's good news for those who mourn, who are deprived, marginalized and in pain is highlighted. Today, Tabatha suggests to us an opportunity to focus upon the gospel as assignment and commission: the good news of responsibility for those who have resources, talents, and material well-being.

No doubt about it. In the teaching and work of Jesus, people of means, rich people, don't come off well. But must the educated, rich, and influential persons (for I must remind you that compared to the vast majority of our brothers and sisters in the world, nearly all Americans are rich, educated, and influential) forsake their gifts in order to enter Christ's kingdom? We must do more than quit our jobs and move to an agricultural commune. The church has more to say to people of means than merely, "You ought to be ashamed that you have so much stuff."

Rather, we must deal with the hard task of thinking about how to use power and resources in a responsible way. For most of us have been blessed in special ways. Some of our gifts have come from God; some of them have come from our own selfish exploitation and mad striving. Now, what will we do with those gifts?

A key text for thinking about our appeal to persons of strength and talent (like Tabitha) is: "Much will be demanded from everyone who has been given much" (Luke 12:48b).

When the rich young ruler came to Jesus, he asked Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus told him to obey the rules. "I already do that," the young man responded.

"Then go sell everything you have, and give it to the poor," Jesus said. Jesus was not laying down a new rule (though we should probably take this command of Jesus more seriously than we usually take it); Jesus was simply offering the young man a way to live, not by the limits of rules and regulations, but by the freedom and challenge of responsible gratitude.

Think about Christian ethics, not primarily a matter of do's and don'ts, rules and regulations, but as guides in gratitude. Gratitude, not obligation, is at the heart of the matter.

Children seek rules, black-and-white codes of conduct, simplistic canons of what is always right and what is always wrong. Children seek rules; mature adults need challenges. The person of strength will be urged to ask, "What is God asking of me in the light of my God-given talents and abilities and in the light of my neighbor's needs?" We are accountable for our talents and our gifts. To tell a person of strength that self-discipline, creativity, competence, and intellect should be smothered under the cloak of imitative weakness ("I'm not all that rich," or "I have my own problems too.") is to tell them to go bury their talents in a field.

Throughout the Bible prosperous persons are entrusted with great responsibility. The poor are always the responsibility of the rich. (By the way, in the Bible to be "rich" simply means anyone who owns something, has a roof over one's head and enough food to get by from day to day. I remember former moderator Walter Farquharson telling the story of impoverished people in Mexico who were asked how they would define a "rich" person and their response was someone who ate 2 meals a day.) In the Bible it is not the responsibility of the widows and orphans to fend for themselves. There is no debate in the Bible about the "deserving poor." There is often talk about the "undeserving rich" but not the "deserving or undeserving poor." The poor are the responsibility of the rich simply because the poor are poor and powerless, and the rich are rich and powerful. We, who live in the part of the world which controls 80 percent of the world's resources (a country where less than one-fifth of the world's population consumes one-half of the world's resources), need to hear that call to responsibility.

Some years ago, there was a television advertisement that showed a young paperboy delivering his newspapers after school. The advertisement, which is presented by an oil company as

a “public service,” goes something like this: “You are looking at a businessman. He works only a few hours after school each day. But this little businessman makes more money each day than over three-fourths of all the world’s people. Free Enterprise—it works.” Who are we kidding? The history of our continent, the nature of our geographical and geological situation tells us that we are where we are not necessarily because this or that business system works better than some other system, but because we have been richly blessed and we have been aggressively self-seeking. If a young paperboy, working after school on a paper route, can make more money than three-fourths of the world’s hard-working men and women, what does that say to us about the just distribution of the gifts of the earth?

How are prosperous persons to be responsible as their brother’s and sister’s keepers and as God’s stewards? I am confident that the answers to that question will come as we start to see ourselves for who we are: people of gifts and people of responsibilities. Thank God that the good Samaritan had money, and thank God that the good Samaritan responded to the need of his neighbor with his money. Our response doesn’t have to be merely in individual terms. Think how the story might have turned out if the Samaritan’s neighbor had been a neighborhood instead. Think of how many ways we have in our modern world for responding not just to individual neighbors but to whole neighborhoods as well. We in the “have” nations have unique opportunities to help the “have nots” of the world. We are fortunate enough to have been born into a community of doers and deciders. Our skills and gifts require us to make difficult decisions each day. We are not helpless in the face of the cruelties in life. A person in an impoverished country may be concerned about the starving child in South America. But aside from prayer, there is little that the person in India can do. The case is different for us.

There are still many areas of our lives over which we do not have control. But we are far from

totally helpless. Our competence to solve many of humanity's age-old problems is growing. Can we respond out of this relative, but nevertheless real, human competence?

Strong people, who are not only materially strong but emotionally and spiritually strong as well, are people who have unique opportunities for Christian response in significant ways. The immature, weak person is fragmented and enslaved by immediate concerns, conflicting loyalties, and the approval of others. The great needs and tough questions of the modern world demand mature, integrated, disciplined Christians who have a source of strength which is greater than that which the world gives. These are the tough ones, willing to let others lean on them, willing to have their strength used by someone else who may not be as strong. Such strength can be an instrument, not a hindrance, to the achievement of social justice and human liberation. Let us call upon the strong ones among us to rise from strength to greater strength and take responsibility for their places in the history of salvation. They must use their talents and not just feel guilty or run away from wrestling with their responsibilities.

It is a psychological axiom that only secure, strong persons have the freedom to love others selflessly. It takes a well-endowed person to be truly selfless and gracious. Eric Fromm, in *The Art of Loving* (Harper Collins: 2019), contrasts the person who keeps with the person who gives:

The most widespread misunderstanding is that which assumes that giving is "giving up" something, being deprived of, sacrificing. People whose main orientation is a nonproductive one feel giving as an impoverishment...

For the productive character, giving has an entirely different meaning. Giving is the highest expression of potency. In the very act of giving, I experience my strength, my wealth, my power...I experience myself as overflowing, spending, alive, hence as joyous. Giving is more joyous than receiving, not because it is a deprivation but because in the act of giving lies the expression of my

aliveness.

So I close with a few questions that I'd like you to dare to make your own, questions inspired by the goodness of Tabitha: What are some of the gifts, opportunities, and blessings that God has given me that, through me, God might cause me to bless others? When I come to the end of my life, what will be the evidence that others will offer as testimony to my generosity? Thanks be to God. Amen.