

Tabitha's Story

Acts 9:36-43

Today we come across the anecdote of Tabitha who is all too often overlooked in the stories that make up Acts. On those occasions when she is discussed it is as the model of all “good” women – virtuous, engaged in charity, but not an actual leader in the church – which would make her an ideal story to have on a “traditional” Mother’s Day. However, two of these three statements are accurate, but the third – that she is not a leader – is a falsehood. It is also a falsehood to say this relates to a “traditional” Mother’s Day.

You see, Mother’s Day started when women in the US took a stand against war and systems that sent their sons off to fight the sons of other women. It was a protest against the patriarchal systems that limited the role of women and saw their sacrifice as giving up their sons to war. It was not the commercialised niceties of today until another 50 years later. Similarly, the story of Tabitha was of a woman who defied traditional understanding and roles of women in her society.

The widows, whom Tabitha – a disciple - served, were among the most marginalised people in ancient Greek society. Although it varied according to local culture, women were typically restricted in what they could do outside the home and still be considered an acceptable person. Unless they had a trusted male family member who could organise trade, only the richest of women had options, and typically the best option for a widow was to marry again. That only worked if the widow brought wealth of some description into the relationship.

And so, these widows were the ones who really had nothing. Later widows became a particular order of ministry in the church and its own stipended ministry, but that is much later than this story. They relied on the support that Tabitha gave, and this is evidenced through the clothes they showed Peter. It is a reasonable assumption the clothes were simply something tangible to show of the support they had received.

Peter had a bit of a problem at this point. In an earlier story in Acts, the apostles had been accused of neglecting some of the widows in the church, and so the order of Deacons were created to ensure the vulnerable in the community received care. On that occasion, the apostles had messed up (again) and now Peter is faced with a similar challenge – a group of vulnerable women who have lost their support. How will he respond this time? Perhaps he sends the mourning women out because he is not quite sure how to comfort them. Presumably this is completely out of Peter’s comfort zone.

And what to make of the emphasis on Tabitha’s “good works.” It certainly has been argued that she was raised because of her good works, but that is only part of the story. Tabitha becomes the archetypal Christian, who lives out her faith – actions that speak louder than words. Like Jesus before her, Tabitha does what she can to bring relief to the poor of her community, and she would not be the only one in the community doing that.

However, faith is important here. We often read this story and focus on Peter's faith as he sent the mourners out the room and prayed. Perhaps we could construct it that Peter was called to be a mourner for this woman who had been such an important part of the community. After all, he was only about 22km away from Joppa, so quite reasonable. On the other hand, culturally, people were buried as soon as practical. To wash a body and place it upstairs in the guest area of the house went against everything that was culturally normal. The people around Tabitha had faith that something different could occur, and so they sent for Peter. Their faith, which echoed her faith, was an important part in this story.

And so, as the story continues, Tabitha follows Jesus, not just in the work of his life making a difference for those who are struggling, but also following him in Resurrection. We miss the detail in our English translations, but in commanding Tabitha to "get up" Peter uses the same word the author uses to describe the Resurrection at the end of the Gospel. This choice of words is significant and deliberate. Tabitha is a follower of Jesus in every sense of the word.

The situation of women in Australia is (mostly) very different to the world that Tabitha inhabited. We have the capacity to seek work outside of the home, and supports in place to care for those who rely upon us. In the Uniting Church, women are accepted into leadership roles and have been for our church's almost 50-year history. These improvements are not available for all women, and I think of my colleagues in other denominations who have male colleagues who think that women's ordination is invalid and who, as a result, treat their female colleagues with derision. There is still the need to work towards addressing issues such as domestic and family violence, particularly in relation to coercive control that keeps so many people (mostly women) from reaching their potential.

As we finish this time of reflection, I invite you to do something a bit different. Usually I suggest some questions to ponder, but today I would like to invite you to ponder a person. Think of a woman in your life who has paved the way for you to be able to achieve all that you have. Take some time to give thanks for that woman and reflect on your learning from her life. And as we do that, we also give thanks for women through the ages who have been inspired by the disciple, Tabitha.