

TABITHA'S HERITAGE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

April 29, 2007

Scripture: Acts 9:32-43; Revelation 7:9-17

Last week Betty Jones and I attended the New York Marine Society annual dinner. It was a gala event with shipping tycoons, merchant marine cadets, admirals and captains, the city's modern seafaring elite who come together once a year in a black tie affair to give out scholarships to local maritime academies and to honor a distinguished business person in the shipping trade. For the last 206 years, the pastor of First Church, has been a member of the board of the Sailor's Snug Harbor, a trust that makes stipendiary grants to "aged, decrepit and worn out" merchant mariners, as the will that established the trust stipulates. So we were there to represent the trust.

As the crowd gathered for the social hour I watched today's equivalents of the 18th Century founders of this church gathering and talking about importing and exporting, ports and harbors, and the American share of the world trade economy. We no longer sail the seas with masted ships. Our cargo is transported in steel containers piled high on massive seafaring vessels that draw more water than was ever conceivable when the early elders and trustees of this church came to worship in the old sanctuary on Wall Street, in their three pointed hats.

Christianity goes back 2000 years, but New York Presbyterianism goes back 300 years to an Irish born and Scottish educated preacher by the name of Frances Makemie. He learned at the University of Aberdeen about Presbyterianism, that version of Calvinism championed in Scotland by John Knox.

Makemie's primary work was in Delaware and the Eastern shore of Maryland, but he came to New York and preached as a dissenter from the Anglican majority. The small band of Presbyterian *wannabes*, mostly transplanted Scots in this city, thrilled at his evangelical tone, and in 1707 he was here planting the seeds that would blossom into this old church in 1716.

For his efforts, Makemie was arrested by Lord Cornbury, governor of the New York colony, held captive for a month and finally tried and found not guilty of charges that he was preaching without a license.

So if you wonder where it is that this rebellious streak came from that runs in this church, there's your answer. It was there from the beginning. There's always been a touch of independence and questioning at the heart of this congregation. The walls of this old place are embedded with the plaques of religious free thinkers and slightly rebellious types like Nichol and Lenox and MacDougal and all the other early partisans that earned for this congregation the name the Church of the Patriots.

If you wonder where our social conscience came from, there's your answer, too. It was there from the beginning. They were people who traded around the world, who fought for independence but who did so seeking peace, who wanted only to create a city and a nation of freedom and justice, and create a church where their form of worshipping God would be tolerated.

You can read about that early church in Dorothy Fowler's wonderful history of this congregation, *A City Church*. It tells a story that is quite amazing. Over the years this congregation has been consistently outwardly directed.

The three congregations that have blended into this church over the years, the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, the University Place Presbyterian Church and the Old First Church on Wall Street, were marked and defined by their witness and service to others.

As early as 1744 the church had established a fund to care for the poor. It was one of the first benevolent agencies in New York City.¹

In 1837 The Society of Earnest Workers for China was organized at First Church and financed the Lourie High School in Shanghai. The Presbyterian Home for Aged Women was organized by a group of women of this congregation meeting in the church's lecture room in 1866.² The Sewing Society made *Havelocks* and flannels for soldiers during the Civil War.³ In 1875 this church permanently funded a bed at the Presbyterian Hospital for the poor of New York without regard to race, creed, or color.⁴

In 1926, our predecessor University Place Presbyterian Church established Fredericka House as a summer camp for needy girls aged 5-12 who enjoyed the fresh air and lakeside setting of Sandy Hook, Connecticut where over 150 children each summer spent a week.

My own pastor when I was growing up, Reith Gewin, tells the story of being stationed here in New York City in the Coast Guard during World War II, and the warm welcome he received from the congregation here who provided a Sunday meal at home for any military personnel who came to worship. Welcoming strangers was the hospitality that marked the life of this congregation in difficult times.

Now why am I telling you all this? Well, partly because it's Heritage Sunday here at First Church, and this is the one Sunday each year that we look over our shoulder and think about our past as Presbyterians in this city, and partly because of how well the story of our reaching out to touch the lives of others coincides with the story we read today from Acts, about the raising of Tabitha from the dead.

Like similar resuscitation stories in the scriptures where Jesus raises the dead, the stories of Lazarus for instance, and Jairus' daughter, this is a story of *Peter* raising a woman from the dead in the life of the early church, after Jesus' resurrection.

Her name was Tabitha. In Greek, Dorcas, a name that is literally translated "gazelle." And you get the picture of a fast moving, motivated woman who buzzed around that early church in Joppa doing good things. Like our predecessors in this church did, when they sent children to camp, and established a school in China, and knitted flannels for civil war soldiers, and invited service people to dinner on Sunday afternoons following worship.

Tabitha's particular gift was sewing and knitting and caring for all the widows in town. Luke says "she was devoted to good works and acts of charity." In fact, after she died all the women in town showed up to mourn her, holding the layettes and baby sweaters and booties and mittens that Tabitha had made. She was the sort of person who, when somebody died, was the first to come with a casserole in hand. She was the one

who would offer to baby sit for the kids when you had a doctor's appointment. The one who called when she sensed there was something wrong after she passed you on the street.

Every now and then someone comes along in your life who is like that, sensitive to others, outward directed, selfless and compassionate. Somehow the church always has a few of these folks. They organize the collection of canned goods for the food pantry. They volunteer to serve meals at Bailey House to people with AIDS. They take a turn sleeping overnight or setting up the sandwiches at the homeless shelter upstairs. They pack toothpaste and bandaids and soap and a toothbrush and shampoo in small boxes for Church World Service and send them as care packages to an elementary school class in Baghdad. They volunteer, as some of you have done, to go to Nicaragua to build a small house for a poor family. Or clean out a house devastated by Hurricane Katrina. These folks make great deacons. They are the salt of the earth, an inspiration to a church.

No wonder when Tabitha fell ill they sent for Peter to hurry as fast as he could and come and help her get well. They couldn't do without her. Tabitha, after all, was a one-person gazelle of compassion and help in that little town of Joppa. A singular Little Sisters of the Poor, all wrapped up in one package. And they couldn't afford to lose her.

So they grabbed all the little things she had made as symbols of their affection for her and they went to her bedside, these women of Joppa. And when she died they were devastated.

Peter, standing in Tabitha's room, with all of these friends whose life she had touched was moved with compassion, and seeing how much Tabitha meant to them, he cleared the room, and fell to his knees and prayed for her life. I don't know what you make of this, but he spoke to her a word that broke through the death that held her captive, and she opened her eyes and sat up. Then calling the grieving women outside the door, Peter invited them back into the room, and they entered with amazement and gave thanks to God for Tabitha's deathless life.

Now I suppose you might wonder at a story like this. We all have lost someone that we might have loved to be able to call back to life from death, whose absence is so great in our heart, and whose loss weighs heavily upon us. So why Tabitha? Why is it that she is the one called back to life, and why is it that her story is remembered, the story of a woman who served others?

I can't fully know the mind of Luke in remembering this story, but one thing I see, for sure, is its confirmation of the life of Tabitha and the work that she did, and the lives that she touched.

It's a wonderful story, don't you think? The story of the continuing power of God present in the world after the resurrection, confirming that God's love and life giving grace did not end with the earthly life of Jesus but continues in the life of the church as it is carried forth in the ministries of the likes of Peter and Tabitha and the women of Joppa who learned from her what it is to be the church.

The Bible is selective, after all, about who it remembers. And the fact that a *woman in Joppa* is remembered by *name* and by the *grief* that followed her death, and the *influence* and *impact* of her life in the church, is a strong witness, and a powerful claim

on our attention. It's not just everyone that gets this much ink on the pages of the church's annals.

The Book of Acts, tells us what happened next, after Jesus' resurrection. And what happened? Churches began to form and the gospel began to spread. And not just Jews believed the message, but Gentiles too, like Tabitha. And women became believers, and they were leaders, and their works and deeds of witness and service touched the lives of many. And for her efforts even Tabitha was blessed with resurrection power as she was raised from the dead, demonstrating that that love and power that comes from God had not died with Jesus, but was experienced by his faithful followers.

And so the work and ministry of Tabitha is affirmed and confirmed in this story of the early church. It is part of the family album that we thumb through every now and then, looking at those in the church who have gone before us, and whose example inspires us, and whose legacy and heritage is our own legacy and heritage.

The individual story and heritage of a particular church is always part of a larger heritage and tradition as well, and for us that is a church with colonial roots, and Scottish roots, and before that Swiss and French roots, and before that Jerusalem and Joppa and Jericho and Jordan roots, the land of the Bible, the land of Jesus, the promised land of God's covenant people.

Always good to know from whence you've come, because it helps to inform where you go. And on this heritage Sunday at First Church I want to claim for us Tabitha, and her ministry of self-sacrifice and service and compassion.

I want to claim and lift up the people of this church who, like Tabitha, have served Christ by serving others, and continue to do so, and who by so doing, share the power of the resurrection in a world whose fear and dread and despair deny the gospel.

I want to claim and celebrate the women here who started the Presbyterian Home for Aged Women, and founded that school in Shanghai, and sewed Havelocks and flannels for Union soldiers, and who funded a bed at Presbyterian Hospital for people regardless of race or creed or color (in 1875 for heaven's sake!), and who sent girls to camp every summer in the 1920's.

I want to celebrate the folks here who have shown up with the casseroles and knitted the layettes, and brought the canned goods, and worked on the welcome statement in the bulletin that has appeared there for the past dozen years that makes it plain that we welcome gay and lesbian and transgendered members of this church.

I want to celebrate the folks who are going to Appalachia soon and the ones who went to Mississippi recently to provide Katrina relief. The ones who collect baby supplies for the New York Foundling Hospital, and the ones who have marched in the anti war rallies in the last year or two. The people who've taught Sunday School and shared their faith in word as well as example. The people who put arms legs and passion into their faith. I want to celebrate them. The Tabithas of this church.

You can say all you want to about the ministers of this church, and there have been some great ones through the years, some notable in the history of American Protestantism and Presbyterianism. Ministers are important to the life of a church. But even more important to the life of a church are the people who live their faith every day

in the world. A church, after all, is not a minister, but a congregation who love and serve their Lord because they are convicted and committed to the love of God expressed in Jesus Christ.

We have many blessings in this church. An inspiring sanctuary. Glorious music. Rich worship. A wonderful mix of humanity that gathers here each week. So many children. A school for autistic kids. A prized Nursery School. A weekday program for seniors living in the neighborhood. It's a great church. But all those notwithstanding, if there are not some folks like Tabitha, baking the communion bread, calling on homebound folks, knitting blankets, folding sheets for the shelter, driving boxes of canned goods to the Church of Gethsemane, all the other things would not be enough.

On this Heritage Sunday I lift up Tabitha, who is for us a symbol of resurrection life in the Joppa church and in every church, because her simple acts of caring and compassion expressed in a visible and tangible way something of the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. She lives still in churches like this which are her legacy. So is it any wonder that death could lay no more claim on her than it could on Jesus?

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¹ Dorothy Fowler, **A City Church**, (New York, NY: The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, 1981) p. 17

² Ibid, 96.

³ Ibid, 96.

⁴ Ibid, 95.