

Grace and peace to you in the name of our risen savior, Jesus Christ, who consistently shows us how great God's love is for those we have pushed aside. Amen.

Earlier this week, at our Tuesday Bible Study, we took a deeper look at this passage we heard today from Acts.

It's always fun when a story we may have overlooked surprises us with details that seem to rise to the surface... in a new way.

For us, this week... it was this beautiful story about this disciple... Tabitha.

She is the only woman in scripture to be specifically named a disciple, even though some translations have converted the word 'disciple' into 'woman.'

She was, in fact, a *named disciple* of Jesus.

And she cared for those who were vulnerable and marginalized... she cared for them out of her own resources... the widows and the poor.

She cared for them with love and offered them dignity in a very practical way... by weaving and sewing their clothes.

This is significant. In first-century Rome, a person might only have one or two pieces of clothing at a time, and those pieces likely would have been made for them.

So, the making, washing, and repair of clothing – a basic human need – was a serious business in the ancient world.

Through giving of her time and skill, Tabitha was able to elevate her community of widows into a community that clearly cared for and supported each other

...while surrounded by a society that would sooner have them pushed aside as objects.

We are familiar with the social hierarchy of first-century Rome.

A widow without a son was at the very bottom... they were the most vulnerable, and it is a recurring theme in scripture and Christian history that we, who follow Christ, must care for them.

I have seen many examples of ministries that go above and beyond to care for those who are incredibly vulnerable and in need... the widows of our time.

I would say our Parish House is one example of a ministry that goes above and beyond to restore life and dignity to those who are so incredibly vulnerable.

And yet... how often do we encounter aid and ministry that assumes the ones being served will always depend on that aid?

How often do we evaluate programs... and find that they consider those they serve to be objects of charity, rather than potential agents of ministry?

Why do the stories of helping widows tend to fall short of imagining ways for them to become prosperous... or even simply... ways to reduce their vulnerability?

You see... I think this was what was so special about the disciple, Tabitha.

She understood Jesus' command to love and care for others, especially those who are vulnerable...

She understood this to be a mission to not only provide for basic needs but also elevate them and restore their humanity and dignity.

She understood the command to love those on the margins as a command to bring those who have been pushed aside... back into the center.

This is what Jesus did. Again and again.

Jesus healed people by restoring them to their community... and he usually did this by curing the illnesses that kept them apart.

This is what Jesus did, he loved people and restored their dignity... and so this is what his disciple, Tabitha, did.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, loves us so deeply that we are more than mere objects of charity.

Jesus' love for us is so abundant that we are restored... renewed... and transformed... and commissioned to carry that love forward to others.

This kind of love not only sees and cares for the vulnerable on the margins, but it pulls them back into the community and calls them beloved and valuable.

There is a community of women living near Guatemala City. They are the widows of those men who were disappeared during the great wave of violence and terror that the Guatemalan government perpetrated against the indigenous population in the 1980s.

The community is called La Esperanza, which means "hope."

The women came together to offer mutual support and care for each other and their children.

They would not accept direct charity, but they did accept funds from a Presbyterian program to build one durable building in the center of their community, which houses a day care center, a preschool, a health clinic, and a weaving cooperative.

They have divided the responsibilities necessary for running their community, such as caring for the children, cooking, cleaning, sewing, and weaving clothes for themselves and to sell for income.

Some have trained as dental hygienists and nurse practitioners to care for the community's health needs.

These women have a dignified life... they were cast aside, but through love and care for each other, the kind of love that comes from Christ, their lives are renewed.

I imagine that if the disciple, Tabitha, lived today... we might find her in a community like La Esperanza.

...we would find her in a community centered around hope.

We would find the disciple, Tabitha, where we find other disciples... in places where hope in the risen Christ is transformed into loving action for those in need.

The kind of loving action that transforms a person from an object of ministry, into an agent of ministry...

Transforming people who have been lifted up into those who can, in turn, lift others.

This is the power of Christ's love working through us... through Christ's disciples.

And all of this is remarkable... but we haven't even reached the most remarkable part of the story.

The disciple, Tabitha, was so important to the community of widows... and so important to the community of Jesus' disciples... that when they sent for Peter after her death, he came immediately.

And through Peter... Jesus restored Tabitha, back to life.

Because she lived, the community of widows would not be left alone.

This story about the disciple, Tabitha, teaches us something about the nature of Jesus... about the nature of God...

That God's love for those on the margins is so great, that God will not leave them abandoned.

And yet there is more...

Because Tabitha lived, the community of widows understood firsthand that with Jesus, death does not have the final say.

Reality is no longer bound to life and death, but rather, by Jesus' promise that through him, all things are made new.

Those widows in Tabitha's community were no longer beholden to society's vision for them at the bottom of the social hierarchy... they were newly caught up in Christ's vision for them... as valuable, worthy, and beloved.

A legacy that was surely carried forward into the community at La Esperanza.

Through the resurrection power and love of Christ, we, too, are always being made new... remolded and remade... reminded that we are worthy and beloved.

Through Christ's love... we are transformed. Amen.