

We are Witnesses: Through Our Actions

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Acts 9:1-20; John 1:5

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We live in a sound byte society.

- We want things in small, easily digestible chunks,
 - so we can get the information we need
 - and move onto the next thing on our ever growing list of things to do.
- We scan the newspaper headlines,
 - but most people rarely read all of the stories that are printed.
- Television, of course,
 - created the sound byte,
 - giving us news in 30 second bursts.
- So for example,
 - even though hours of videotaped interviews were done
 - when the media descended upon our community over the last two weeks,
 - only a few brief moments and words
 - ever showed up on TV.
- The same is true of sports.
 - If you go to a football game,
 - that is three hours long
 - and you watch the coverage on Sportscenter,

- you see the three or four big plays - -

- the most dramatic, most important moments

- and that's all.

-We have become conditioned

- to look for the big, dramatic stuff in life

- and let the ordinary,

- everyday stuff, just pass us by - -

- Which is why

- when I looked at today's reading from Acts

- and the story of Peter and Tabitha, - -

- I was instantly drawn to what Peter does in the story.

- After all,

- Peter is the one who comes

- and raises Tabithia from the dead.

- That's the headline in the paper,

- the lead story on the news,

- it's dramatic and impressive

- and it is, of course,

- the first thing I saw as I read the story.

- Peter prays and God,

- through Peter, raises Tabitha from the dead.

- Certainly, Jesus raised Lazarus

- and God raised Jesus,

- but for a man like Peter to raise someone from the dead,
 - well, that was big, big news.
 - If there had been networks and reporters,
 - they would have been there - -
 - to get the story of this extraordinary miracle.
 - God, through Peter,
 - has done something unbelievable, amazing, - -
- And even without media, the act of raising Tabitha
 - certainly caught everyone=s attention.
 - As the text says,
 - “This became known throughout Joppa,
 - and many believed in the Lord.” (Acts 9:42, NRSV)

- Peter’s actions that day
 - were an effective witness to God’s power in the world.
- Peter=s actions that day
 - were an effective witness to the good news that thanks to Christ Jesus,
 - death no longer has the final say.
 - But - - I don’t want this big, impressive miracle
 - to overshadow
 - the rest of this story.

- For in reality,
 - while the raising of Tabitha

- is an impressive, wonderful, dramatic event,
 - it is also an extraordinary, unusual event
 - which didn't happen often in the disciple's time
 - and certainly doesn't happen often, - -
 - in the same way,
 - in our time.

- But. - - if we look past the big, splashy headline,
 - if we look past the 30 second highlight -
 - and really look at the rest of the story of Tabitha and Peter,
 - I think we see
 - not just a miraculous witness to God's power,
 - but three wonderful, doable examples
 - of how you and I
 - can witness to God's love and presence
 - through our actions.

- Let's start with Peter
 - - Peter is called by Tabitha's friends
 - and he comes to be present with them.
 - They don't particularly ask him to come and raise her from the dead.
 - They just want him to be present with them
 - in their time of need and pain and grief.
- As we have experienced,

- over the last couple of weeks -
 - there is something powerful about knowing someone is there for you.
- There is something hopeful and helpful
 - about having someone beside you
 - to offer a hug or a listening ear
 - when you are struggling with pain and loss.
- Peter knows this
 - and so Peter goes to Tabitha.
 - Peter goes to be present with her family and friends.
 - We don't know if Peter knew what was going to happen
 - when he prayed with Tabitha,
 - we simply know Peter went to be with them.
 - Peter witnesses to God's love and compassion
 - by his presence in their midst.
 - I'm sure
 - that's all Tabitha's family and friends expected.
 - The miracle that happens next -
 - doesn't diminish the wonderful witness that Peter's presence provides, - -
 - and just like Peter
 - any and all of us
 - can witness to God's love and compassion
 - by being present with someone in need and pain.
 - You don't have to know what to say

- more often than not,
 - there aren't any right words to be said
 - and the person you are with,
 - really doesn't expect you to have any words to say,
- but by simply being present with someone
 - either in person
 - or over the phone
 - or through a card or email
 - or through something like this Prayer Bear
 - from Peace Lutheran
 - you help that person to know
 - that they are loved and cared for
 - by you and by God.
 - You help that person to know
 - that they are not alone, - -
 - for you are with them
 - and God is with them.
- So by merely being present,
 - you can be a witnesses to God's love.
- A ministry of presence, however,
 - is not the only active witness
 - we see in this story.
 - Did you notice who had gathered to mourn Tabitha?

- the text says
 - when Peter “arrived, they took him to the room upstairs.
 - All the widows stood beside him,
 - weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcus
 - had made while she was with them.” (Acts 9:39, NRSV)
- That little bit of information
 - would never have made the news today.
 - It=s not dramatic enough to make a headline,
 - but in this detail about the mourners,
 - we learn about the powerful ministry Tabitha had
 - and the powerful witness to God’s love
 - that her actions provided.
- Widows,
 - in that time
 - were at the bottom of society.
 - No one cared for them or protected them,
- but Tabitha,
 - obviously reached out to them to provide them care and help.
 - She provided clothing and assistance.
 - She shared compassion and hope
 - with these women who had nothing.
- Her ministry in Joppa

- may have meant the difference between life and death for these women.
 - There was no profit in helping these widows.
 - There was no fame in helping these widows,
- but that is what Tabitha felt God was calling her to do
 - and so through her talent for making clothing,
 - Tabitha witnessed to the love of God.
- You may be able to make clothes for someone in need.
 - You may be able to unclog a drain for a neighbor.
 - You may be able to offer a word of kindness to an outcast.
 - You may be able to teach a skill
 - to someone down on their luck.
 - You may be able to cook
 - or to write - -
- the specific action you undertake
 - is less important than the act of using your gifts in God's service,
 - as Tabitha did,
 - to reach out and help someone in need.
- For when we reach out,
 - simply as a response to God's love for us,
 - without any thought of reward for ourselves - -
 - our actions provide a powerful witness
 - to God's love in the world.
- Finally,

- let's look at Peter one more time,

- for in the final detail of this story,

- we see one more example of how we witness through our actions.

- “Meanwhile,” the story says,

“[Peter] stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.”

- (Acts 9:43, NRSV)

- Now by this point in the story

- we are ready to wrap things up.

- This detail would be buried at the end of the story.

- It wouldn't make it on TV

- and if it was in a newspaper it would be in the last paragraph,

- but it is yet another example

- of witnessing to God's love through our actions.

- Peter stays with Simon, the tanner.

- Now that may not seem like a big deal to us,

- but tanners were considered ritually unclean

- in Jewish circles.

- They were outcasts.

- I'm sure there was someone of import

- that Peter could have stayed with in Joppa,

- but Peter went to stay with the outcast.

- Peter wasn't worried about his place in society,

- he wasn't worried about what all the “right folks”

- would say about him.

- Peter simply went to where he needed to be

- went to the people he need to be with

- and by his actions, - - he helped the outcasts

- and the rest of the world to see

- that in God's eyes there is no distinction between people.

- We are all,

- no matter who we are,

- children of God

- and God loves us all.

- The raising of Tabitha

- is, of course,

- the big headline in this story,

- which reminds us of the good news

- that God in Christ Jesus is victorious over death,

- but the rest of the story

- helps us to know

- that we are witnesses to this good news

- by the everyday, ordinary actions we undertake in God=s name

- on a daily basis.

- For while the big events, like raising Tabitha,

- may get the headlines

- our everyday ministries
 - like clothing the needy,
 - reaching out to the outcast
 - and walking with those who are grieving
- are a powerful witness
 - to God's love for us
 - and God's unending presence with us.