

April 25, 2010 – Dorcas

Acts 9:36-42

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. ⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

My grandmother made this quilt. She made lots of them – using up scraps of material. In this one, I can see bits of material from dresses and skirts that were my mom's and mine. She also made mitts and socks for us every year (which, frankly, as children we didn't appreciate one bit) but now this quilt and one other like it are all I have that she made. It's very important to me. Her name was Mabel Barr Saville and she died in 1984.

Read 36-39

One of the things that emerges from this text for me is something I haven't yet found words to express, at least in a way that I wanted to bring to you in a sermon, but I will raise it anyway, because I'm quite sure that among us here is a fair bit of wisdom and experience. It has to do with the "stuff" we keep that once belonged to our friends and relatives. For example, when I moved here....I thought long and hard about what to bring, and what not to bring, and I did a huge purging of my belongings....but the things I felt I simply was not prepared to give up, were all the things that belonged to my husband, my parents, my grandparents....their value is not in dollars but in....what IS that currency? By what are we valuing those items? I love looking at that teapot and knowing it was the first one my parents had in their life together. I love the chair that Nate sat in to write sermons. It's honouring them, yes it is; it makes me feel close to them.....

But is there a way that keeping those things is impeding me? Physically, (will I someday be one of those old people in one room in a nursing home that is CRAMMED with the things I refuse to get rid of?) When do we cease to honour our loved ones by keeping the things they made or owned or passed down?

There is a spiritual question in there somewhere, isn't there? And I do want to pursue it, I'd love to hear your own take on all of it. HOWEVER,

My question this morning is: what will it be that we leave behind for the people who come after us?

At what was supposed to be Dorcas' funeral, they brought the things that she had made – the things they would remember her by – weeping – precious to them, now that she was gone.

What will be the things people bring – in their hands or their hearts, to yours? What will their memories be? What “garments” if you will, are you making for others that will clothe them, protect them, warm them, after you're gone?

This is a bit of an aside, but it's amazing to me how emotional clothing is. These people brought to the funeral clothing that Dorcas had made for them. I don't know what it had meant to them before she died, but now that she was dead, (and of course, they had no idea that she was going to be raised to life again) now that she was gone, it meant a great deal to have something that he had touched – that her hands had stitched.

It's like that with clothing people have worn as well – do you find that? I don't know if you've ever had to take care of someone's clothing after they die – but cleaning out the closets is perhaps one of the most painful and intimate of all the things you have to do at a time like that. Clothing is extremely emotional. On mothers' day since my own mom died, I wear a dress that was hers. Just for example. And I have a housecoat that was Nate's – and when I feel like I need to, I put it on, even 24 years later. I bet you have stuff like that. Clothing forges intimate bonds – sentimental, emotional garments, much more than yard goods stitched together. They bridge gaps of time and geography; they make bonds and keep them.

They speak of continuing life in a unique way – resurrection of sorts. It's no wonder that Scripture uses clothing as a metaphor so often: from Adam and Eve, right through to white robes in Revelation – wouldn't that be an interesting study sometime? Not now though.

Those must have been some of the feelings they brought along with the garments to the upper room where Dorcas rested.

So again: what are you making in your life – what gifts are you giving to people that will remain with them when you're gone?

And – as a church – what are WE making? What are we fashioning that will be handed on – a gift to the generation to follow us?

There's a lot of prayer and thought these days about the direction the church is heading – what will be our future, what form the church will take in coming generations, and what will be our mission in the future. Good questions.

What will we leave to the Christians here who follow us? Some say there WILL be no future for the church. I simply don't believe that. Ask Dorcas if life can come out of death.

Some people feel we should pass on exactly what was given to us. No changes, no alterations, - the church exactly as it was given to us from our own parents and grandparents.

Is it a garment that will fit our children? Has it worn well for us? In any piece of clothing passed on down, especially if the material is sturdy and strong, there have to be alterations – take up the hem, let it out, take it apart and sew it back together, in some cases remake the garment entirely.

What changes will need to be made so that this church fits a new generation? Protects them, warms them, gives them room to move in the way they need to move, lets them express themselves and empowers them as all good garments are meant to do?

What changes? Are we willing to make them? To refuse to change is to let the garment hang in the closet, yellowing and fit finally for a museum. Is that what the church is destined to become?

When this generation of church people is gone, what are the things our children will bring to our funeral – thankful that we made them?

The other readings for today are about shepherds and sheep. In some ways, the questions they raise are about leadership – what kind of leaders are right for the church in this day and age, for the church as a whole; for this church? And always, always – to answer such a question look first to God. What kind of leadership is right for such a time as this? What kind of leadership should we give? Well, first, what kind have we been given?

From Revelation, a fantastic vision of a God who is at the centre of creation and is the God of ALL PEOPLE. This is the God, who with the Lamb, is with the people in their deepest trouble – who has experienced that trouble too, to the point of death, and who has become victorious over anything the evil in this world can do. THAT'S who God is....the One who is the centre of every created thing and who will be with us until the end and beyond; who stands with those who suffer and who shows that suffering will never have the last word.

From John – God, the One who knows us by name, who leads us by going the way before us, who is willing to sacrifice everything to protect and defend us – and who wants us to be one flock.

And from Acts....God, who entrusts authority to a scraggly band of uneducated cowards who turned into a church – the very Body of Christ, able to do what he did. Here we have Peter, by the power of God, *raising a woman from death*

Very like the raising of Jairus' daughter by Jesus, remember? He said to her "Tabitha, cumi" which means "little girl, get up" Here, Peter says the same thing.

Here is God trusting the Good News – the precious message of salvation, trusting it to – to us! What kind of leadership is that? What can we learn about leadership from this cluster of readings today? We could talk about that a long time, but we won't :0)

I'd like you to think about it though – and talk about it among yourselves. Whatever we do as far as our own leadership is concerned, we need to take our pattern and cue from God.

One who suffers with us; who knows us by name, and who is willing to sacrifice - even God's own life, for us. One who trusts leadership to others, and who raises up those who can carry on, in faithful ways

Raises up leaders – disciples – like Dorcas. We could go a long way to find a better example of Church leadership. She was "full of good works, and acts of charity". She was a disciple. She used her gifts to create things of beauty and usefulness

How very God-like – to make something from nothing; to take a scrap of material – see in it possibilities and turn it into something unique and gorgeous

To take many scraps, not much good by themselves, that normally would clash when put together with the quilter's skilful and loving hands, turned into a crazy quilt. Or a church.

To take something old and worn out, and remake it so that it's like brand new again. A coat into a jacket, a dress into a skirt, Saul into Paul, the person you were yesterday into the person you are today. Mending parts that are worn out and not so strong any more,

What is more God like than that?

At work right now in the church are individuals and group – Dorcas – who minister and lead in just those ways.

As we face the future and consider what things we will have to leave behind, as gifts to those who come after, by looking in Dorcas' direction

We'll not be far off the pattern

Amen.