

Faithful Disciples

Winter Quarter: Faith in Action

Unit 3: Self-Controlled, Upright and Godly Faith

Sunday school lesson for the week of February 18, 2018

By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Scripture Lesson: Acts 9: 36-43

Over the next two weeks, our lessons will focus on those two early Christian leaders, Peter and Saul/Paul. The ninth chapter of Acts is filled with information about the earliest days, as the Christian faith spread across the Roman world. At every critical point, a person made a difference. For example, fearfully, Ananias came to the blinded Saul and called him “Brother!” Later, Barnabas would serve a similar role in introducing Saul to the frightened Church in Jerusalem.

The focus now shifts from Saul/Paul to Peter. Our lesson tells the powerful story of a faithful disciple who lived in Joppa. A bit of geography and history about this Mediterranean seaport seems in order. Because Joppa is the closest port to Jerusalem, the city had become important as early as Solomon. Remember, from Joppa Jonah sailed to avoid going to Nineveh, as God had directed.

At this time, a strong Christian fellowship of Jewish believers existed in Joppa. One of them is named Tabitha/Dorcas. Luke, the Gentile author of Acts, gives us both her Jewish and Greek names. She is labeled a *disciple*, not simply a follower of Jesus, implying she had a leadership role in the fellowship.

Her most notable role was as an example to other believers, as she used her talents to minister to those around her. As we saw in James, and as Jesus said, disciples are known by their fruits—and Dorcas was certainly fruitful! Her specific gift was the wonderful items she created with her nimble fingers. In one of the churches we served there was a *Dorcas circle!* The women came together and made all kinds of usable items to share. As with their namesake, the community was blessed by deeds of mercy and compassion.

This faithful and loving disciple became sick and died. Her faith and good works did not prevent the ravages of illness and death, nor were they punishment for any wrongdoing or sin. Sam will never forget an encounter in the hospital when he was visiting the sick wife of a ministerial friend. This person said to the husband in front of Sam, “If you have enough faith, she won’t die!” She did, and the hurt lingers on these many years later.

The detail about the tender care given to Dorcas' body reveals much about Jewish burial practices. Remember why the women were coming to the place where Jesus' body lay on that resurrection morning!

The church in Joppa sent emissaries to Lydda, only 11 miles away, and asked Peter to come. Obviously, the lines of communication worked well for them to know he was near. Peter came immediately. The urgency probably arises from Jewish burial practices. They did not embalm. Natural degeneration would begin at the point of death. (Read John 11:39) Those disciples, who made the exhausting round trip from Joppa to Lydda, four hours each way, are also examples of the compassion and mercy within the fledgling congregation.

When Peter arrives he is taken to an "upper room" where Dorcas lies, surrounded by those who loved her and had prepared her body—the widows! In their grief, they showed Peter the evidence of her life—clothing made for others.

Now we come to the heart of the story. One commentator makes a very important assertion. "The point of this event is not that faith kept one safe or even that faith caused the miracle. The point of this event is how the raising of Dorcas brought others to faith."

Peter has everyone leave the room. In privacy and humility he prays. With few words, Luke describes the moment as Peter speaks and Dorcas responds! He reaches out with his hand, and helps her stand. The word Luke uses, which we translate "raised her up," is the same word used for resurrection. This word is used only three times in the Book of Acts. In each instance, the reference is to Jesus' resurrection. Dorcas will die again, as did Lazarus. This event is a sure sign of the resurrection to come for all believers.

Next Peter presents her alive to those who had prepared her body for burial and stayed with her body in grief. Acts makes very clear who these people were – widows! In your student book, the writer specifies that neither here nor in Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter do the individuals speak. Their raising was for the benefit of the community.

Always in the New Testament, miracles are signs the Kingdom of God has begun. God's Kingdom overturns the ways and the thinking of the world. There is a poignant moment in Luke's story of Jesus in the Gospel. John the Baptist is beginning to doubt Jesus' identity. He pointedly asks: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?" (Luke 7:19-20) In answering, Jesus points to evidences of the overturning of the world's order: "the blind see, the crippled walk, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up."

The apostles are now empowered to do the same. In the concluding verse, we are told where Peter would be for the next stage of the Jesus story. The breakout into the Gentile world will originate from the house of Simon the tanner in Joppa.

The loss of a loved one to death is a constant reality for all. We have observed and personally experienced the effectiveness of the Church in responding to the needs of people in such times. Either in personal or public crises, the Church brings life where there is death and destruction. Hurricane, flood, drought, fire, illnesses, accidents, war—in all the arenas of human suffering in our broken and fragmented world—the Church is there, both locally and globally.

We cannot end this lesson without a word for our global United Methodist Church reaching out to offer life in so many different ways. Following World War II, the Methodist Committee on Relief (MCOR) was born to minister in the aftermath of that great tragedy. Today, of course, the agency is called UMCOR. Luke describes the church in Joppa as God's holy people, and that is exactly who we are, and why we do what we do. Keep on keeping on!

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