

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 12 2019

Acts 9:32-43 (NIV)

³² As Peter traveled about the country, he went to visit the Lord's people who lived in Lydda. ³³ There he found a man named Aeneas, who was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. ³⁴ "Aeneas," Peter said to him, "Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and roll up your mat." Immediately Aeneas got up. ³⁵ All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.

³⁶ In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (in Greek her name is Dorcas); she was always doing good and helping the poor. ³⁷ About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. ³⁸ Lydda was near Joppa; so when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and urged him, "Please come at once!" ³⁹ Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them. ⁴⁰ Peter sent them all out of the room; then he got down on his knees and prayed. Turning toward the dead woman, he said, "Tabitha, get up." She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter she sat up. ⁴¹ He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. Then he called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive. ⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord. ⁴³ Peter stayed in Joppa for some time with a tanner named Simon.

Sermon: The Ordinary and The Extraordinary

We all know that time doesn't stand still; Easter has come and gone! And since then, we have considered two of the post-resurrection appearances, namely, Jesus walking alongside two people going to Emmaus,¹ and Jesus meeting the disciples by the sea of Galilee and reinstating Peter with the command to "feed my sheep."² But the story doesn't end there; Luke's book of Acts relates how the early church becomes established and how the good news spreads from Jerusalem all the way to Rome. And we are a part of that ongoing story today, because the Holy Spirit is *still* work in the Church and in the world. Today's Lectionary Reading comes from about a quarter of the way through Acts and it seems an odd passage to emphasize in the context of all of the other possibilities that one could consider in the story of God's continuing mission. It is the story of how God uses Peter to heal a paralyzed man, called Aeneas, and to raise back to life a beloved woman called Tabitha - or Dorcas in Greek.³ Yet the details Luke presents are sparse and we're left wondering, "What is Luke trying to say?" and "What are we to make of these events today?"

In terms of overall context, the first thing we must appreciate is that Luke has just introduced Paul, formerly known as Saul, through his dramatic "road to Damascus" conversion story.⁴ We also know that, before long, Luke will focus much of the rest of Acts on Paul and his missionary journeys to modern-day Turkey and Greece. But at the moment, the early Church seems to be quite comfortable simply ministering to Jews in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria.⁵ In one sense then, today's passage is a transition switching the narrative from Paul back to Peter and giving us an update on his activities. What it demonstrates is that Peter is doing precisely what Jesus had called him to, namely to "feed his sheep" by teaching, encouraging, and generally caring for "God's people."⁶

The second thing we notice is that Peter has a growing reputation as a *healer*, following the tradition of the Old Testament prophets - like Elijah and Elisha.⁷ And while the details of what he says are largely absent in today's passage, earlier, in Acts 3, Peter says to the lame man who was begging at the entrance of the Temple: "I have no silver and gold, but what I have I give you, in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth stand up and walk." Peter then helped the man to stand and he was healed. Not

¹ Luke 24:13-35. See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/worship-and-events/bulletins-and-sermons/>

² John 21:1-19.

³ Tabitha means "gazelle" or "deer" in Aramaic. Uniquely in the New Testament, she is described in the feminine form of the Greek word "disciple."

⁴ Acts 9:1-30.

⁵ Acts 9:31. Philip's earlier mission to Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) has already been a stretch for strict Jews, who generally despised the Samaritans (see Luke 10:25-37). Consequently, the notion of going even further and spreading the "Good News" to non-Jews - necessary if Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 is to be fulfilled - would require a new work of the Spirit in the lives of the Jewish leadership, *including* Peter. Luke will soon take us there in Peter's encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10:1-11:18).

⁶ The word Luke uses here is "saints" (9:32,41) which means "holy ones," or more generically, "different" or "set apart" - i.e., called of God for *his* purposes. The Church, then, is the *new* Israel (God's people) called to serve and spread the Light.

⁷ See 1 Kings 17:17-24 (Elijah); 2 Kings 4:19-37 (Elisha).

surprisingly, this miracle created an opportunity for Peter to preach a sermon!⁸ Although Luke reports no sermons in today's reading, his readers would presuppose the *contents* of Peter's earlier speech outside the Temple gates. It was there that Peter said, "Why are you so amazed by this miracle? This is *not* done by my own power or personal holiness, rather, it is God's Spirit at work through the risen Jesus Christ."⁹ In today's reading, Peter, says the same thing to Aeneas, a man paralyzed for eight years: "*Jesus Christ* heals you; get up and make your bed!"¹⁰ And the man immediately gets up, creating quite a stir, as you can imagine! If that miracle is not shocking enough, Luke then tells us about raising Tabitha back to life; I will talk more about her in a moment. The point I want to stress here is how Peter comes to a house in Joppa and asks for all the mourners to leave the room where Tabitha is laid out, and then he kneels and prays. Again, this indicates that what happens next is *God* at work, not Peter. And he simply says to her, "Tabitha, get up," and she opened her eyes and sat up; then Peter gave her his hand and helped her up.¹¹ Those with good memories will recognize that all this is *very* reminiscent of Luke's earlier accounts of Jesus raising Jairus' daughter back to life and of Jesus healing a paralyzed man.¹² This, I believe, is the key thing Luke is stressing here. The kingdom of God *is* here, it has definitely begun! The same kinds of things Jesus did are being *continued* in the life of the early church. The Jesus-story goes on in the power of the Holy Spirit, especially among those who believe.

Now let's consider the person of Tabitha for a moment. All we know is that she was a faithful follower of Jesus and known for her good works and helping the destitute, particularly – it seems - widows.¹³ In that culture, widows, by definition, were poor and on the bottom rung of society with no safety net and without anyone to represent them or to protect them. Tabitha gives them clothing and dignity, and with her death, her life-giving work could die with her. The community at the coastal town of Joppa have heard that Peter happens to be at Lydda, a town some 10 miles inland. They call him to come at once but without telling him why! Tabitha's death has caused a crisis because now the most vulnerable have no one, and Peter may have been expected to find a practical solution to the widows' ongoing needs. Shockingly, and as I mentioned a moment ago, Peter did what he witnessed Jesus doing in a similar crisis. God's compassionate Spirit was powerfully at work through Peter and he raised her to life! This is yet another reminder that death is *not* the last word in God's economy and, as Luke proclaims in Mary's Magnificat, God raises up the lowly - literally in this case.¹⁴ Tabitha's work was too important to die!

What are we to make of this today? Acts is not a narrative that easily fits into our contemporary worldview. Such stories can seem a far cry from our experience of God and therefore many want to relegate such narratives to myth and legend. That, I believe, is a serious mistake. The world-wide Church

⁸ See Acts 3. This incident resulted in a backlash (Acts 4:1-22), not surprisingly given its Temple location. No such negative reaction is reported in the miracles of Acts 9, which effectively follows on from 8:25,40.

⁹ See Acts 3:11-26.

¹⁰ Acts 9:34. This sounds remarkably like Jesus' instructions in Luke 5:24b (see also Mark 2:11 and John 5:8.)

¹¹ Acts 9:40-41.

¹² Luke 8:49-56 and 5:17-26; see also Luke 7:14.

¹³ Acts 9:36,39,41. The plight of powerless widows is emphasised by Luke (see Acts 6:1-2).

¹⁴ See Luke 1:50-55 and 1 Cor 1:26-31.

would not have survived 2000 years if it were merely established on legend. We do not need to leave our rational minds at the door to enter the world described in the book of Acts, *but it is necessary* for us to accept the assumption that God is still working powerfully and graciously through his Spirit in the lives of people to restore this broken world. The kingdom of God that Jesus introduced is a new age where reality is not based upon a rigid logic, or cause-and-effect circumstances, but on a faithful God who keeps his promises. And we also have to remember that the timespan Acts covers is 30 years, and so we must resist the temptation to think dramatic miracles happened at least once a week!¹⁵

Even so, such incidences make us wonder about the effectiveness of our own prayers and the sparsity of miracles today.¹⁶ We are full of questions: Why Aeneas and Tabitha? Why those particular people and not someone else? Luke does not offer an explanation.¹⁷ We are told that Tabitha was “devoted to good works and charity”; was, therefore, her *merit* the reason she was restored to life? No – God’s undeserved grace is the very opposite of merit-based thinking! However, when we read Acts, it does sound like every prayer was answered in a way that makes prayer appear even magical.¹⁸ Did Peter and the other apostles pray for miracles and they *not* happen? Well, actually, yes!¹⁹ For example, Paul tells us in Corinthians²⁰ that he had an unspecified, persistent problem that he begged God three times to be removed. It was not. Paul believed God’s response was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”²¹ For Paul, his prayer *was* “answered,” but *not* in the way he wanted!

Sometimes our own experiences of so-called “unanswered” prayer can be so discouraging that we give up even asking. Our “Why?” questions overwhelm our weakened faith. There are *no definitive* answers to such questions; if there were, the practice of prayer would indeed become like magical incantations. Each complex set of circumstances is different, and what is possible in one situation may not be the case in another scenario. Gregory Boyd puts it this way: “Prayer does make a difference, but so does the necessary regularity of the world and every free choices of humans. We have no way of knowing how the power of prayer intersects with these complex variables. Nevertheless, we can pray with confidence, knowing our prayer *is heard and makes a difference*; our prayers contribute to the future. But we can’t pray with certainty that the difference our prayer makes will have the precise outcome we desire. In this sense we can’t be certain our prayer will be answered.”²² I would add, that’s why we should therefore, *keep on praying*,²³ always asking with humility, faith, and expectancy. I preached on

¹⁵ This is part of Luke’s literary and rhetorical skill!

¹⁶ We must *never* see miracles as (exclusive) alternatives to working with the medical profession or others!

¹⁷ Even in John’s account of Jesus’ healing at the pool of Bethesda, only one man was healed when there were clearly many in need (John 5:1-15).

¹⁸ See Acts 5:12-16. Peter emphatically rejects any notion of magic powers in Acts 8:9-25.

¹⁹ In Luke 9: 1-6, we read that Jesus sent his disciples out on a mission with authority to drive out all demons, to cure diseases, and to proclaim the kingdom of God – and they did! But later (Luke 9:37-43), after the Transfiguration of Jesus, on coming down the mountain, they found that the remaining disciples could not exorcise a man’s sick son.

²⁰ 2 Cor 12:7-9. There has been much speculation as to the nature of his “thorn in the flesh”; a person, a disability, a recurring illness, chronic pain? We simply don’t know.

²¹ 2 Cor 12:9.

²² Boyd, *Is God to Blame?*, 134 (adapted; he further argues that angels have freewill and also participate in history).

²³ See Luke: 11:9-10.

this two months ago,²⁴ and while I believe Greg is right, I want to add some additional thoughts as we further consider the “Why?” question of “unanswered” prayer this morning.

First, it may be that our prayers are too often for *ourselves* and *not* for others. This is not necessarily wrong or inappropriate, for we are all broken to some degree and in need of God’s grace and healing. But it does tell us something of our own priorities. Second, prayer is also a *communal* act²⁵ where we are deliberately inviting God to be actively present among us all so that the kinds of things Jesus worked for may be realized in *our collective* lives, including forgiveness, restoration, healing, wholeness, peace, and joy. Consequently, when we pray for ourselves and for others, we should also consider the larger question: “How would this answered prayer enhance the kingdom of God?” In today’s reading, the outcomes of those prayers were very public, resulting in faith spreading within the community.²⁶ Are we prepared to proclaim and publicize the answers to prayer we have experienced, or do we want to keep them private? If we really want to see prayers answered and experience miracles, we must be prepared to witness to what God is doing amongst us and not keep such things secret! Third, and building on that, we know any miracles will be very rare, by definition. Even so, the message of Acts suggests we have grounds to expect them to occur where the Spirit of God is discerned to be particularly active. That can be through specific people, in expectant communities, and at *critical* times in the life and mission of the Church. It seems to me that this is more likely to happen at the “cutting edge” of kingdom of God activities and where systemic evils are being confronted.²⁷ Again, such things are very likely to be public. Now, this is *not* intended to be discouraging but simply to make us reflect more on *our own* motives when praying.

There is a further important point to make here: we would *never* have heard of Tabitha but for this story in Acts; she was not a famous person in her own right, like Peter or Paul. She was a faithful disciple with a big heart for widows and the poor. In a sense Tabitha stands for all the unsung people who have simply got on quietly with the job of serving others without expecting glory for themselves. The worldwide Church has many such people, and this congregation has some too! Perhaps Luke is celebrating the life and work of ordinary players in the story of the kingdom of God. Of course, the Church needs its “Peter’s” and “Paul’s”; however, our communities need *more* Tabitha’s who compassionately go about making a positive difference to the least in society, working to bring healing to the broken. And we thank God for every one of them!

This week a great and humble man died: Canadian, Jean Vanier. Unlike Tabitha, his remarkable life and achievements have been celebrated, and deservedly so. But like Tabitha, it was because he dedicated his life to those glossed-over or forgotten by society. He founded the *L’Arche* community in 1964, allowing people with developmental disabilities and those who assist them to share their lives together in an atmosphere of compassion. Since then, well over 140 such communities have arisen in more than

²⁴ See: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/The-Context-of-the-Lords-Prayer.pdf>

²⁵ This is also true of the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:1-4), which though for private use is still a communal prayer for disciples.

²⁶ Acts 9:35,42. [The point I am considering here is individualism verses community-building.]

²⁷ This is in-keeping with C. S. Lewis’s astute observation: “miracles [tend to occur in] areas we naturally have no wish to frequent.”

35 countries. Toronto's Cardinal Collins said of Vanier: "In a world that increasingly pushes us to gauge success and worth by what we own or who we know, he reminded us that authentic love, friendship and community are what we really need. He taught us to value the dignity of every individual." Vanier himself simply saw this as his contribution to living out the gospel of Jesus Christ. We thank God for his inspiring life. He was a modern "Tabitha," doing ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

In conclusion, even with these remarkable stories from Acts, there will always be an inevitable element of mystery about prayer and miracles. Even so, let us be encouraged for as Christians we believe God is *continually* active in all of creation and is busy at work, incrementally realizing the reign of God and bringing good out of evil. And usually that is through ordinary people like Tabitha, or Jean Vanier, or you, or me, doing ordinary tasks. But in critical situations we should have confidence to ask God for extraordinary grace and for the seemingly impossible to happen. Such prayers are always requests – of course - and, regardless of what transpires, we hold on the fact that God partners with those who are cooperating with him and share and practice his values—God's Spirit is most certainly still *with* us. Vanier's work is a testament to that in a cynical age. Let us therefore affirm two profound truths: God works through *both* the ordinary *and* the extraordinary. For those who keep on seeking the extraordinary, learn first to recognize God in the ordinary. And for those who lives seem perpetually in the mundane and ordinary, never give up on a gracious God who wants to do extraordinary things through you and me. Let us pray.