

“A Name Worth Embracing”
Acts 9:36–43
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It is wise to use a bit of care in appropriating biblical names, to make sure we understand what they mean and what the people connected to them were like. But it is also wise to employ a little humility in making this point. While teaching a young couples class early on in my ministry, I told the class rather boldly to be careful about using biblical names. “For goodness sakes,” I said, “Don’t name a daughter Jezebel!”

One of the women looked startled. Then, she said with a straight face, “Why not? We named our daughter Jezebel.” I felt a sudden tightness in my gut and began to ponder how I might reframe my statement, but before I could say anything, she laughed and said, “Just kidding!”

Care is called for in numerous ways, but the name in today’s reading from Acts is solid. On the surface, this is a miracle story. Peter is called for help when a woman in Joppa dies, he somehow brings her back to life, and this miracle persuades people to believe in Jesus, though it raises questions for us. Was she really dead or just thought to be? If she was dead and brought back to life, why doesn’t this happen anymore? Does no one have adequate faith or were miracles like these only possible in the early days of the church?

But setting aside these questions, and taking the story at face value, there is a richness to the woman whose life is renewed. Tabitha is her name in Aramaic, Dorcas in the Greek. It means gazelle and she is gazelle-like, a work of beauty in God’s realm. In many churches, there are Dorcas classes, usually made up of older women, and it is a great name for a class because Dorcas is not just a lovely name but a wonderful example of faith. So, this name is worth embracing, and whatever we make of the miracle, this woman merits closer attention.

One thing to note about Dorcas is that she is devoted to good works and acts of charity. Specifically, we know she makes clothing for others, especially the widows who are present when Peter arrives. Apparently, her

life is defined by service, giving to others. She is a living embodiment of Jesus' calling to deny self and put others first. It is no wonder the people send for Peter and beg him to come from the nearby town of Lydda without delay. They don't know what they are going to do without this precious woman! They don't want to lose her!

Dorcas is for those early believers and for us a clear sign of what is most important in Christian faith — our willingness to serve others. While this may sound obvious, it is not the center of faith for many people. Some focus on correct beliefs. This was a central theme of the takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. If you didn't believe all the right things, according to those making the power grab, you had no voice. Others insist on the correct stance on certain ethical issues. To reference the most immediate concern this week, abortion has become a litmus test for justices and other politicians. Some Christians have been willing to ignore a host of major transgressions of character as long as a person defends their believed-to-be correct stance on this one issue.

And to be clear, theological beliefs and ethical stances matter, though they tend to be more complex than the black-and-white reduction ideologues prefer. But Jesus' calling again and again is not to believe this, or take that stance, but rather, "Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me." Follow me in a path of service and love. To use the image Jesus does in our reading from John 10, if we hear our shepherd's voice, we follow him, and this is how we do it, in service.

An evangelism professor I had, whom frankly I didn't much like, used to say, "The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." It's a bit like the irritating British saying, "It is what it is." But the general contention is accurate. The founding pastor of my previous church put it this way. He said that at Knollwood, we tried to put the em-Pha-sis on the correct sy-Llable. It's not a matter of dismissing beliefs and critical life issues. It's a matter of what is most important, what comes first, where the emphasis is put, what the main thing is. According to Jesus, it is service. Dorcas gets this, Dorcas lives this.

The good news for us is that service lies at the very heart of our shared life. We see this in the details of our dreaming process. Many of our most significant memories are of various service experiences, and one of the things

we most want to continue with any future plans is service to the community. We see this in our care of each other in times of need. We see it in our clothing ministry and food truck. We see it in our involvement with Family Promise, Habitat for Humanity, Urban Ministries, Oak City Cares, and many other service organizations.

We are wise to maintain this focus. Critical issues must be engaged, and beliefs matter, but nothing is more important than our love for each other and our service to people in need. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that life's most persistent and urgent question is, "What are you doing for others?" Indeed, it is.

Another thing to note about Dorcas is what her story tells us about the role of women in the early church. We see this throughout the Christian Testament, though as Bart Ehrman documents in his book *Misquoting Jesus*, in the received tradition, the role of women has probably been scaled back from the actual role they played. As the church began to move ahead of the culture around it, some roles were restricted and the texts were altered in minor ways, perhaps including the verses in 1 Corinthians 14 which tell women to be quiet at church, and if they have a question, to wait and ask their husbands at home (vv. 34-35). It is jarring, given Paul's assertion in the 1 Corinthians 11 that *when* women pray and prophesy, a technical term for preaching, they should cover their heads (v. 5). How do you preach and be quiet at the same time? No preacher has ever figured that out... obviously!

But even with the scaling back of women's roles in scripture, women follow Jesus. Mary sits at his feet as a student before a rabbi. Women remain at the cross when the men run away in fear. Women are the first witnesses to the resurrection. In Romans 16, Phoebe is a deacon in Cenchreae. In Acts 16, a woman named Lydia assists Paul's ministry in Philippi. In Acts 18, Priscilla, along with her husband, Aquilla enhance Paul's ministry, though Priscilla seems to take the lead. In our reading, Dorcas is devoted to good works and acts of charity, providing widows with clothing. And as already noted, in 1 Corinthians 11, women preach. Women lead in the early church in every way.

How ironic it is, therefore, that so many churches, including Baptist churches, continue to exclude women from many leadership roles. One of

four questions our beloved former pastor Randall Lolley asked of our old denominational structure at a press conference on November 19, 1987, after he resigned as president of Southeastern Seminary was this. “Southern Baptists, how long will you go on calling young girls and women to faith in Jesus Christ; telling them to dedicate all their gifts to his lordship, recommending them from your churches to your seminaries, and then upon their graduation refusing to consider them as your pastors and teachers?” He added, “Do you realize that you are requiring us in your seminaries to be duplicitous with your daughters? And that you may be muscling in on the calling of God?” (as documented by *Baptist News Global* after Randall’s death on March 21).

Now, we have had women deacons since the nineteenth century, we’ve ordained women to ministry for about a half century, this is not an open question in this church and others like ours, but it still is in many settings. Mary Barham, who was ordained a deacon here years ago, has been back to her home church in a small community three times on Deacon Ordination Sunday. Each time only men were being ordained, only ordained people were invited to participate in the laying on of hands, and it was assumed that this would include only men.

But the first time Mary was there, she got up and participated while the pastor looked on in horror. The next time she was back on this Sunday, she started to get up, and he vigorously shook his head no! Can you imagine saying no to Mary? The third time she was there, the church had a new pastor, but apparently the former pastor let him know about this uppity woman who thought she was a deacon, and he shook his head no! But Mary had made her point, women are called by God to service too, and the church needs to recognize their gifts. The real question is whether God can call men to service!

Dorcas provides an example of Christian service and her story is but one of many in scripture that provide evidence of the role women play as leaders in the early church, but there is one other thing we might learn from her story. Dorcas may or may not be a deacon officially, but she is doing the work of a deacon, serving those in need. Widows especially, along with orphans, are vulnerable in the First Century. Thus, their care is named repeatedly as the

responsibility of spiritual leaders like deacons. But what matters most is not what formal role Dorcas has; the ministry she provides is authentic and meaningful. The widows who grieve her absence and show Peter her clothing are living proof that her life mattered, her ministry had an impact on them.

The message for us is that it is the ministry that matters — what we do for others — will speak for itself. This is not to say that we should not advocate for women and others who have been excluded from leadership to have formal recognition. It's simply to say that nothing can stop a caring soul from caring for others, and just because someone has a title doesn't mean he/she does the work associated with it.

In numerous settings where I have been, I have known people who were not recognized as deacons because of their gender or identity, their social standing or age or some physical limitation, but who showed up when others experienced loss, brought food and wrote cards, offered spiritual counsel when it was needed. In the eyes of God and in the hearts of people to whom they ministered, they were deacons! It is the ministry that matters.

In one setting where I served, they had not ordained women yet, even though the church depended on them. We decided not to vote on the idea of women deacons. We simply included Selma Cole's name on a list of candidates. Four people from one family voted "no" at the conference where 150 people were present. Those four remained in the church which now has an equal number of male and female deacons.

If we had voted on an idea, 30% of the people would have been against it, but almost no one could vote against Selma, a woman who had taught their children in Sunday School for 60 years, the most thoughtful, Christ-like soul anyone knew. A friend of hers who went to a different kind of church told her she didn't believe in women deacons, but if Selma was called to pastor a church, she would join it!

It's the ministry that matters. Dorcas shows us that. Dorcas . . . it is a name worth embracing, and hers is an example worth following.