**SERMON “More Than the Garments”**

**Reverend Lisa Eleck**

**Olivet Congregational Church, UCC**

**May 8, 2022**

# Acts of the Apostles 9:36-43

Now 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. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. Since 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.’ So 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. Peter 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. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

**Sermon “**More Than the Garments”

When my daughter was a junior in high school, she decided that we – she and I – should sew her gown for the junior prom. Now my daughters are both very determined individuals. When they get something in their heads, well, they are determined to see it through. Now, I had done some sewing, but trust me, I am not nor was I ever a seamstress.

Yet my daughter can be very convincing. She said things like, “We can do it. Just think of the mother-daughter bonding time we will have.” Now I have to admit, that I was thinking more along the lines of where would we find the time, of all that could go wrong and of how we could end up not talking to each other if things didn’t go well. But how could I pass up her request, especially when she used the words, “mother-daughter bonding time.”

So we chose a simple pattern and fabric that would be fairly easy to work with. We made it through cutting the fabric and the initial sewing. The gown was coming along and we were still speaking to each other. But then we came to the zipper. I have never had good luck with zippers. Never. But, I had an aunt, Auntie Fay, who sewed a lot. She could sew anything. So I called her and she agreed to help with the zipper. I must admit that my aunt actually put that zipper in one evening when my daughter and I went to her house.

With Auntie Fay’s help, we were able to finish the gown. My daughter wore it to her prom. And she and I were still on speaking terms. I have to admit though, that I was quite happy when my daughter told me she wanted to buy a gown for her senior prom.

I don’t know what I would have done without my aunt, who was so willing to help us. She was a wonderful, devoted mother and grandmother. She was always there for her girls when they were little and when they were grown and when they needed help with their children. She even welcomed one of them back home for a time with her husband and children, as their house was being built. Things were a bit crowded, but there was lots of love. And she loved sewing for people. She found the time to help, even while working full time. And when she died, the church was full at her funeral. You see, she had been there for lots of people. She had been an unassuming, gentle, loving, giving person; using her talents and doing God’s work all her life.

In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning, we hear the story of a follower of Jesus, a disciple who was devoted to good works and acts of charity, named Tabitha. Her story is the only time in scripture that the feminine of the word for disciple is used.

Now, it’s not often that we are told the names of women who were followers of Jesus. Yet here we hear that Tabitha was known by two names. Tabitha was her name in Aramaic. Dorcas was her name in Greek. That would indicate that her acts of charity and good works extended to those who spoke Greek. She ministered to people across different cultures. And we know that her ministry extended to widows, those who were vulnerable and poor or at least at risk of being poor. These women had received beautiful garments that Tabitha had sewn.

We hear no mention of Tabitha’s family; of a husband or sons or daughters. We assume she was a widow. But we don’t know for sure. We do know that her discipleship was recognized by other disciples, who upon her death, sent two men to ask Peter to come to her home. For two men to reach out to Peter and ask Peter to come to the bedside of a woman who had died would have been extraordinary. It was truly recognition that Tabitha was a devoted and beloved disciple who used her gifts to serve others – the vulnerable in the community and others outside of the community.

There was certainly a bond between the community and this woman of great faith. Her gifts and life were a so much part of that early community of faith that two disciples went to Peter and asked him to come “without delay.” Were they hoping for a miracle?

Peter was developing a reputation for healing in Jesus’ name. He had just healed a man who had been paralyzed and bed ridden for 8 years, Aeneas. We hear that Aeneas was a believer living in Lydda. Peter had gone to his house and prayed aloud saying, “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!” Immediately, he got up. And all the residents of Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord.” Peter had demonstrated the power of Jesus that was within him.

So Peter went with the men to Tabitha’s bedside. We hear that when Peter arrived, all the widows, amidst their tears, showed him the garments she had sewn for them. I imagine that they shared stories of Tabitha’s service too. After all, that’s what people do when a beloved person dies. And Tabitha was beloved.

Apparently Peter was moved – perhaps by the service of Tabitha, perhaps by the love that the men and widows of her community had for her. Peter sent the women out of the room, knelt at Tabitha’s bedside, and prayed. We don’t know his exact words this time, but we trust that he called upon Jesus and his power to overcome death. And Peter’s prayer brought Tabitha back to life. It was a miracle! This miracle not only returned Tabitha to the community of faith. As the word of this healing spread, more people became believers. That community of faith grew.

While Peter performed these miracle healings, we know that Tabitha and Aeneas, and Peter as well, would someday die. But we trust that they will join their Savior in a new way when that happens. Likewise we trust that we will be among those who join our God in a new way.

In the book of Revelation, the verses that are part of today’s lectionary, John shares his vision of ***“****a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”* The multitude was praising God and giving thanks.

Then we hear that one of the elders asked John, *“ ‘Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?’ I said to him, ‘Sir, you are the one that knows.’ Then he said to me, ‘These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*

*For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’* ***”*** Revelation (7: 9-10, 13-17)

Tabitha, if she were a widow or if she had never married and had no children, would not have had an easy life. But she served the Lord using her talent, the sewing of garments, to reach out to the vulnerable and those of a different culture. Aeneas suffered with paralysis and being bedridden for eight years. His belief in the midst of physical challenges was a testimony to the strength of his faith. My Aunt Fay had lived through her own struggles in life but still served countless others. All of them were individuals of faith; who had experienced personal ordeals in their lives, yet were respected, supported, and loved by their faith communities. And we, in our lives, all know individuals like them, who face challenges but continue in faith and service of others.

We do not always know the ordeal of others. We may not even know of all the things they have done to follow in the way of Jesus; caring for his sheep. But whoever we are and whatever our place in life, whatever our nation or language, whether we are confined to bed or are ablebodied, when we share our gifts – whatever our talents may be – we live our faith as individuals. And as a community of faith, we can support each other, especially in times of struggle.

When we do, we can be among the *“great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches” in our hands,* praising our God.

In the meantime, we can cloth ourselves in the love of Jesus, share that love with others and praise God with our prayers and our lives in resurrection hope.