

## **Sermon Women Leaders of the Early Church: Dorcas, Acts 9:36-43**

Prayer: Jesus, you called us by name to serve your people. Help us to do so in humility and love with the gifts you grant us. Amen.

**Introduction:** Last few weeks we heard about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. This week's reading is also about Elisha, Naaman and the healing of leprosy.

With the New Testament stories, Jesus intentionally shifted equity, dignity, respect, among other things for women within the culture and Religious Traditions. Several women are named and were present in leadership of the early church, but we don't hear a lot about them. Today I will focus on Dorcas. Dorcas was her name in Greek. In Aramaic it was Tabitha. Both are translated as Gazelle. Imagine being called Gazelle. It is a beautiful name that conjures up beauty, pride, and swiftness.

She was based in Joppa, about 55 km Northwest of Jerusalem on the Mediterranean coast. It was an important seaport since the time of Solomon where he imported timber for all his building construction. Joppa was a significant base of population and commercial crossroad. These factors gave an opportunity to grow and develop the church. It was there that Dorcas established her place in leadership. That population base is important to this day. However, with the internet service today people are giving leadership and connecting for work from remote and sparse areas.

Dorcas had a special relationship to Jesus. Jesus called her a disciple – the only woman to be given that title. Saint Paul had a real challenge over the years of his ministry to be seen as a disciple. He pleaded with people that he had been as close to Jesus on the Road to Damascus as any of the disciples who followed him in public ministry. Jesus saw in Dorcas someone special who would fill that role of learning. Saint Paul would not have accomplished his missionary journey without the leadership of the women. In every community Paul depended on the women to support his work with the spread of the gospel.

Dorcas was a devoted disciple and a learner following Jesus teachings. Jesus taught with unique skills in teaching outside the box of the culture, so to speak. There was the inclusion of women and children, acceptance of those who had strayed from the law, giving support to the poor, questioning the hierarchy of the time, being able to see the law in context (such as working on the sabbath), always pointing to God and new understandings of the Kingdom. It was new teachings for the early disciples to learn with a lot of unlearning their former ritualistic traditions.

Dorcas 'acted just like Jesus', which can be the true definition of a disciple and something we might all aspire to in the church – to be like the teacher, to follow the ways of Jesus, to keep asking the question 'what would Jesus have done or say' when facing life issues.

Dorcas followed Jesus in the way she lived. It was to serve others and further the Kingdom of God. She was full of good works.

Dorcas followed Jesus in helping those who were hurting. This was a time when there were no social benefits and many were left to their own. Living on the hills above Joppa in likely a mud hut, she saw needy people along the shores of the sea, collecting whatever floated in.

It says in vs 39 that she was a seamstress, and seems to follow the instructions of Proverbs 31:19-20. 'She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy.' She lived a life of servanthood, a role all of us would more readily aspire to in these challenging times. We want to do things for others as an expression of our faith.

Many of you are followers of Dorcas or can identify with her ministry through sewing, knitting and quilting in ministry.

The prayer shawl group knits shawls for people in the church who are ill and also for babies who are baptized. They are a constant reminder for people of being wrapped in God's love and the connection and care of the church. I know of children who use the baptismal prayer shawl for their own dolls.

The quilting group meets every week to sew those small straight stitches to create quilts that often last for generations in families. The church is there supporting the family. We are the Dorcas of today. You are Dorcas and I am too but get this I do not knit, sew, or quilt. Ken does it all for me.

"Sew on Fire" is an international organization that has a group and warehouse space in Burlington. They did a presentation at Appleby United when Ken served as their minister. They put together sewing kits for people in the developing world to help them make and maintain their clothes. Many are involved in the service, including many students who are getting their volunteer hours.

Some of our churches are supportive of micro financing, such as Ecu Credit Union. The Union provides small loans to entrepreneurs in the developing world. The organization has helped many who work from their homes, often after buying a sewing machine. This is the beginning of independence and making a new life for themselves and their community.

For Dorcas and others who follow her model, sewing, quilting and knitting is a spiritual exercise. Stitch by stitch a prayer goes up. It is a symbolic act of attending to the details of God's world. It is not just doing it for the sake of being out with friends. It is a calling from God and connects people to that inner circle with God. It is a spiritual exercise that brings people closer to God.

It is also good works to help out those in need. It is a valuable ministry of servanthood. Within our culture, and especially for next generations, the church is far too passive. They don't want to sit here in church and hear one more story about Jesus. They want to do something. We know of many good workers in our church that are not here often on Sundays, but are there to help out with a church supper or garage sale, gardening, prepare dinners/lunch for senior members, give leadership within community organizations, participate in activities within the community. For example, Brenda, Kim, Ann and others) We can offer ways for people to be involved with social justice issues, the environment, and helping those in need through the exchange collaboration in Bolton.

Dorcas is a model of faithful leadership for the community of faith. She is devoted to ministry and connects to Jesus in every stitch that she makes. She carried grace and compassion to those in need through her service. Let us: "Shine the light of Christ that others may see our good works and glorify Jesus Christ." Amen

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