

## **“Eternal Devotion”**

Today is Mother’s Day, a day in which we celebrate and honor our mothers. A day in which we focus on the love shown to us by our mothers and the devotion they have shown to us. We know how important it is to have the commitment of our mothers in our lives.

It is appropriate that we recognize Epworth Children’s home on Mother’s day. Epworth has served as a place where children could come and receive care and security when, for whatever reason, they could not receive care from their parents. Originally set up as an orphanage when children lost their parents, in recent years it has served as a welcoming place to care for those children who are neglected or abused.

And it is also appropriate that our sermon passage today from Acts 9:36-43 is about Tabitha, who was an early disciple. When talking about her, Luke, the writer of Acts, states that Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She was a disciple who walked the walk. She was committed to others at all times. She just didn’t help out at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Like a mother’s devotion to her children, Tabitha’s devotion to others was consistent.

Tabitha’s consistent devotion made an impact on the lives of those around her. When Tabitha dies, her community of believers is stricken by the void left in

their world. But the widows of her congregation don't just cry out for her; they display her good works. Even though she is still silent by death, God is still able to speak through her. Evidence of her good works is shown in the tunics and other clothing she has created as well as in the tears from the eyes of the widows.

Although this story appears to revolve around Tabitha, it's also a story about Peter. When Tabitha dies, the disciples send word to Peter that he should hurry without delay. Peter is important. As we have learned before, he provides the model for discipleship for us all.

We are not sure why Peter is called. Is he called to offer comfort? Are the disciples expecting a miracle? We don't know, but it's clear that Peter's presence is important. Peter walked and talked with Jesus; he witnessed the miracles of the Master. Peter is the one who addressed a multicultural crowd at Pentecost and the word of God was spread throughout the land. So, if the disciples were to call anyone during a grave and urgent moment, it would be Peter.

Peter gets up immediately and goes. Just as Jesus, before healing someone or performing a miracle, he began by having compassion. Peter has compassion for those impacted by Tabitha and her own compassionate works. She is dead but the evidence of her work still lives.

Peter has been learning, but when it is time for him to step up to the plate, he is ready. He notices and studies the situation when he gets to the room where Tabitha has been laid. He is surrounded by weeping widows. Then, there are at least three details about Peter's actions that point to the fact that he is a follower of Jesus.

First, before he gets down to business, Peter has to get some people out of the room. This may not seem very compassionate, but he is following Jesus' example. This is exactly what Jesus did in Mark's telling of raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead (Mark 5:40). In both cases it is unclear why the people are told to get out. What is clear is that the people are not optimistic. They are weeping and wailing; in the Jairus story some of them even laugh at Jesus. Peter is confident in the power of God through Jesus Christ, but he knows the value of having people around with the right attitude. The right attitude conveys that God is in control not matter what the situation looks like. We need to remember this--- because the stakes are too high, the road is too long, and today and tomorrow are too important for us to allow a negative attitude to permeate God's atmosphere.

Second, Peter kneels to pray. How he prays is important. He doesn't take the typical prayer posture of his time, standing with arms and eyes raised to heaven. He kneels, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus knelt and demonstrated

his submission to God. Peter submits himself to the Lord Jesus Christ with his petition through prayer. As Jesus commanded Lazarus to come out of the grave, Peter calls Tabitha by name and says, “Tabitha, get up.” Tabitha is raised by God, and Peter helps her up to her feet. Peter then presents her alive to the disciples. As a result of Tabitha being made alive again, the news spread throughout Joppa and many put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Out of a situation which seemed hopeless, a great awakening occurred.

Third, Peter spends the remainder of his time in Joppa with Simon, a tanner. This would not be the most relaxing or refreshing or attractive place to stay. Imagine the dead animal skins, the odor. Imagine the type of work that must be done to what remains of the animal. But we have to remember to go where God takes us in our Christian walk. We cannot limit ourselves. Peter remembers that Jesus stayed in the most unlikely places. And it is here in the home of Simon the tanner that Peter will receive a vision that will greatly impact the body of Christ. That will be the subject of next week’s sermon passage. God can show up in the most unusual places. We have to be willing to work with God in all places.

The story of Tabitha reminds me of the stories of my great-grandmother Belle Powell Culp. Known as Ms. Belle, she was constantly helping those in need. She was a very dedicated Christian and actually graduated from Clifford Seminary

in Union, SC. Based on what I have heard, she probably would have been ordained as an elder had ordination been in place for women when she was younger. She was an active member of Grace United Methodist Church in Union, SC. There is still a Sunday school class named after her at the church, and when I visited there two years ago there were still members who remembered her influence even though she has been dead for over fifty years.

Ms. Belle's influence continued well beyond her death. She was influential in my father Rev. Wallace Culp, Jr. becoming a United Methodist minister. She also influenced my uncle Rev. John Culp in going into the ministry. She had a positive influence over many other people's lives.

One of the more interesting stories about Ms. Belle concerned her cousin Ada. Cousin Ada came to visit one day. Ada was in need of a home for a while. This was during the time of the Great Depression. Ada had fallen upon some bad misfortune as had many during that time. Ms. Belle welcomed her in with open arms. Like Tabitha, she provided consistent help to one in need. I'm sure Ms. Belle hadn't planned on helping Cousin Ada but many times our help is not planned. Cousin Ada stayed thirteen years with Ms. Belle before she passed away. What an ongoing testament to Christian discipleship!

As we close, let us remember that being a disciple is not just about the miracles we see and experience. It's about seeing God in the ordinary places that might not look so attractive. It's about allowing God to work in our lives, no matter where we are or what's going on. God can show up in the least likely places and perform wonders even in situations that seem dormant or dead. Being a disciple means knowing that God is still active in our lives and in our communities even when things might seem hopeless.