

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Sixth Sunday of Easter
May 5, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
That's a lot of love.

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was always doing good deeds and acts of charity. ³⁷ At that time she became sick and died. After they had washed her, they laid her in an upstairs room. ³⁸ Since Lydda is near Joppa, when the disciples heard that Peter was there, they sent two men to him, who urged him, “Come to us without delay!”

³⁹ Peter got up and went with them. When he arrived, they led him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing him the robes and clothing that Dorcas made while she was still with them.

⁴⁰ After Peter sent them all outside, he got down on his knees and prayed. Then he turned toward the body and said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her stand up. After he called the saints and the widows, he presented her to them alive.

⁴² This became known all over Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.

—Acts 9:36-42

Sometimes it happens that you learn more about someone after that person dies than when that person was alive. Have you ever noticed that? As a pastor I have found that to be true. I want to know well the people I serve, but I can only know what people share with me. Right? But sometimes when a person dies and the family gets together to write the obituary, you learn things about that person you never knew before.

The apostle Peter had such a moment in his life. Peter had been traveling from town to town and from village to village proclaiming the truth about Jesus. And as he went from town to town and from village to village sharing the message about Jesus, God enabled him to do some powerful miracles. For example, Peter was in a small town called Lydda and he healed a man who was paralyzed for eight years.

Well, not too far from Lydda, a beloved woman by the name of Tabitha died in Joppa. Joppa was approximately 10 miles from Lydda. And some of the disciples in Joppa heard that Peter was in the area. Two men went to see Peter and encourage him to come with them to Joppa, the seaport city. So, Peter went with them. And as Peter meets with the people, he learns a lot about Tabitha. He didn't find out about her through a written obituary, but he did learn about her from her friends.

Her name was Tabitha in Aramaic or Dorcas in Greek. Both names mean “gazelle.” And from the description of her friends, she was swift in showering a lot of love. She's described as a disciple who was always **“doing good deeds and acts of charity”** (Acts 9:36). And when Luke wrote Acts, clearly God the Holy Spirit wanted us to know the kinds of things she did.

Her good deeds and acts of charity were sewing clothes for people. And those simple acts of service had quite an impression on others. When Peter arrived in Joppa, all those who had benefitted from Tabitha's service showed her handiwork to him. When Luke wrote Acts, God the Holy Spirit wanted us to learn something important about Tabitha's service. It's not the *only* thing he wants us to learn, as we will soon see, but it is significant.

We see in Tabitha a Christian lady who lived Jesus' words from the Gospel this morning: **“Love one another as I have loved you”** (John 15:12). As the people looked at Tabitha's life, they could say, **“That's a lot of love.”**

But think about that love today. Is this the kind of love and service that is “news-worthy?” Last week Pastor Buchholz talked about how we serve the Lord and his people in normal activities in our lives. Often our acts of love do not make the front-page-news. We serve the Lord and his people through the simple, ordinary works in our lives. And wouldn't you agree that was true with Tabitha.

She sewed clothes. She didn't eradicate world hunger. She didn't discover a cure for cancer. She didn't build an orphanage for children without mothers or fathers. No. It was just simple acts of love, using the gifts and abilities that God had given to her for the sake of others.

And, my friends, that's true for you and me. You don't have to do something that is so big and so worthy of being highlighted on the evening news for God to take note of what you have done. What are your gifts and talents? Sewing? Encouraging? Cooking? Organizing? Leading? Fixing things? Whatever they are, use those gifts and talents to serve others. When this service is done to God's glory and not to win praise for ourselves, God considers what we have done to be pleasing to him.

“Oh, but wait! Wasn't it easier for Tabitha to serve others than it is for us? I mean look at how appreciative the people were of her efforts. I'd serve more too if people were appreciative of my efforts.”

Have you ever entertained such sinful thoughts? Have you ever pulled back from helping others because you never get a word of thanks from them? Have you ever stopped serving because you already filled all your service hours for school?

If you have had those thoughts, doesn't that show you the reason you were serving in the first place? Don't those thoughts reveal that what you really want is to get thanks instead of to give thanks? And if that is our motivation for doing things, that's not love.

What was it Jesus said in the Gospel for today? **“My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you”** (John 15:12). Jesus always conscientiously and willfully went into action for the best interest of you. He willingly submitted himself perfect to all of God's commands so that he could credit his perfection *to you*. He offered his hands and feet to death and gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for sins *for you*. He rose from the dead guaranteeing that sins are forgiven and heaven is open *for you*.

That's a lot of love! And because we are loved by Jesus, that's why we love and serve others. Oh sure, it's great when people recognize our acts of service, but that's not our goal. In fact, Jesus tells us to do our acts of love and service “in secret.” In Matthew 6:1, Jesus said, **“Be careful that you do not do your righteous works in front of people, so that they will notice. If you do, you have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.”** Maybe that's why we often find out about the acts of love and service from Christians through their obituaries. God's people do not seek accolades. They just quietly, conscientiously, deliberately, and willfully go into action for the best interest of others. **That's a lot of love.**

That's what Tabitha did. She knew that her purpose in life was to serve others. She faithfully and humbly loved others. But it's clear that her deeds of love did not make her righteous in God's sight. How do I know? She died. **“The wages of sin is death”** (Romans 6:23).

When you go to a funeral, you don't have to proclaim too much law, do you? It's pretty evident. The reason we die is because of sin. Sickness and death come to all of us as the consequence of sin.

No matter how many good things we do, they can't make up for our sins. Even Tabitha still had to face the consequence of her sins. She died.

But here is where we also see **a lot of love** from Jesus. We catch a glimpse of what is in store for those who are believers in Jesus. Although Tabitha died, she didn't remain dead! Through God's power the Apostle Peter brought Tabitha back to life. Tabitha didn't bring herself to life. No! She came back to life because her Lord and Savior Jesus had already defeated death for her, and he's done the same for you.

Jesus' resurrection is the guarantee that all your sins of tainted service have been forgiven. You have life, eternal life, resurrected life because of Jesus. And what happened to Tabitha will happen to all God's people when Jesus returns. We will rise from the dead! **That's a lot of love!**

Or is it? Was raising Tabitha from the dead, was bringing her back from the dead, really loving *for her*? I mean, think about this. The world thinks death is terrible. The world thinks it's so horrible because it's the end. But that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that for God's believers, for his children who have faith in Jesus, death brings relief. That's how it was for Tabitha. She was finally at the Lord's side. She was home in heaven where there was no more pain or suffering. No more needle pricks on her fingers. No more mornings where her fingers wouldn't work right because of arthritis. None of that. She was free from any and all pain.

I mean, what would you think if you finally made it to heaven only to have Jesus ask you to go back to earth and continue to serve him here? That's what happened to Tabitha. God sent her back to this world to serve and love.

Of course, God didn't bring Tabitha back to life just because he wanted her to sew more clothes. No. God had something else in mind. Did you notice what happened when God raised Tabitha from the dead? Word about this spread, and **“many believed in the Lord”** (Acts 9:42). Many more people came to faith in Jesus.

You see, what is God's ultimate objective? He wants more and more people to be with him in heaven. His primary objective for us in this world is not our comfort. He wants to bring more people to faith in Jesus through us. And by bringing Tabitha back to life here in this world, **“many believed in the Lord”** (Acts 9:42).

Oh, I'm sure Tabitha's friends must have questioned why God took such a caring woman from their midst. God took her because he had bigger things in mind. He wanted to use her resurrection as a way to expose more people to his saving message. **That's a lot of love.**

And you and I are still in this world for one simple purpose. We are here to reflect Jesus' love in our lives. In big ways or small, in visible ways or in secret, we reflect Christ's love. **That's a lot of love.**

And even if no one else acknowledges all that you do as Christ's servant, Jesus will. On the Last Day, at your own resurrection from the dead, Jesus will say to you: **"Well done, good and faithful servant! Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world"** (Matthew 25:23,34).

Do you see why we're eager to serve? We're eager to serve because we have a God who has been serving us since the creation of the world by preparing a special place for us in heaven, a place purchased by the blood of God's Son. Oh, my friends, **that's a lot of love**. Amen.