

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, October 14, 2018 – Ordination of Elders

Hymns: 425 – We Praise You, O God (vss 2,3); 585 – Christ, You Call Us All To Service; 582 – May God’s love be fixed above you (vss 1,3,4)

Scripture: Acts 9:36-42 (JB Phillips)

Sermon Title: “Filled with Good Works and Helping” – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Acts 9:36-42 (JB Phillips)

There was a woman in Joppa, a disciple called Tabitha, whose name in Greek was Dorcas (meaning Gazelle). She was a woman whose whole life was full of good and kindly actions, but in those days she became seriously ill and died. So when they had washed her body they laid her in an upper room.

Now, Lydda is quite near Joppa, and when the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to him and begged him, “Please come to us without delay.” Peter got up and went back with them, and when he arrived in Joppa they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood around him with tears in their eyes, holding out for him to see dresses and cloaks which Dorcas used to make for them while she was with them.

But Peter put them all outside the room and knelt down and prayed. Then he turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up!” She opened her eyes, and as soon as she saw Peter she sat up. He took her by the hand, helped her to her feet, and then called out to the believers and widows and presented her to them alive.

This became known throughout the whole of Joppa and many believed in the Lord.

Had you been downtown on Saturday, August 18, 1951- as at least two of our current members, Jim Stavert and Doug MacDonald were – you would have witnessed a terrifying sight: much of the north side of Grafton Street, where the DVA now stands, was ablaze. As reported in “The Guardian of the Gulf,” on Monday, August 20, 1951, the fire, ignited by a shattered light bulb in McLaine’s Garage, consumed the garage, as well as Horne Motors, Batt and MacRae, the Whelan Building and Hall, Wilson’s Barber Shop, Mary’s Beauty Salon, and others.

Later in the article, we read this: “Firemen were concentrating much of their efforts on stopping the fire from reaching Zion Church, the largest and most valuable building in the threatened area. To this end, they kept a steady stream of water on the building housing the Gloria and Adella’s Millinery, which acted as a buffer between the big blaze and the church.” Before the flames reached Zion, however, as the Guardian reported, “Just at the height of the blaze when it appeared that the whole

block would be destroyed, a providential downpour came to the rescue and aided the embattled firemen... had there been a high wind blowing it is entirely possible that a large part of the city might have been consumed.”

Also appearing in the paper that day was this note of appreciation: *“The Board of Trustees of Zion Presbyterian Church desires to express its gratitude to Fire Chief Jewell and his fire department, the Charlottetown Police, RCMP and all through whose valiant efforts our church building was saved during the disastrous fire on Saturday last – to our neighbours who were not so fortunate, we extend our sympathy in their great loss.”*

So it was a close call – unlike many of the other buildings, some of which were owned by members of Zion, the church itself was spared. But not entirely; as the Guardian reported, *“...a heavy cloud of dense black smoke poured straight up into the sky. It was visible for several miles. Nearby the heat was intense and could easily be felt more than 100 feet from the blaze.”* Just as Doug and Jim and others who were there that day felt it too. And so did Tabitha.

Tabitha, who was also called Dorcas. That’s her, there, pictured in the stained glass window to the right of the organ. Normally, I never mention a woman’s age, but she is the oldest dedicated window in the church, in memory of Marianne MacLaren (1862-1911) presented by her husband J. A. MacLaren in 1913. She – that is, the Tabitha window - was very nearly lost in the fire’s heat, as the wood framing supporting the stained glass was badly scorched, and the lead holding the individual pieces together began to melt. Soot was baked on to the glass, obscuring poor Tabitha’s colours, and closing her off for more than two-thirds of a century from the full light of the sun.

For it was just this summer, sixty-seven years later, when the current Board of Trustees took upon itself the task of rebuilding the windows on the west side of the church, which had been damaged so long ago. The windows were beginning to buckle quite noticeably, and there were concerns we would lose them altogether, if a strong wind or snowload were to hit them just wrong. Thanks to the congregation’s generous support of the work and ministry of Zion, we finally had the funds to address the problem, and it turned out to be not a moment too soon.

Under the Board’s guidance, and through the work of Alvin Coles, the rotting wooden frames were repaired and in many areas replaced. A person could stick their finger right into the soft wood in many places. Workers were amazed at the smell of smoky fire – when outer layers were

removed, the charred wood underneath gave off the scent of burnt, wet wood – which it was. There was graphic evidence of melted lead and collapsing frames, as though the workers were right there, in the aftermath of the fire, back in the fall of 1951.

Following many weeks of repair, restoration and cleaning (old wood cut out, new wood built in), the windows – both the Tabitha Window and the Sea of Galilee window – were finally able to show their true colours again, and aid us in giving Glory to God. These windows – the entire facility – has been entrusted to us as a testament to the presence and work of God in our community, and the maintenance and upkeep of it is one of the ways in which we testify to the continued presence and activity of God in our lives – that the light of God’s love will continue to shine brightly among us, in all the colours of mercy and grace. Come into Zion on an afternoon when the sun is on these windows, and you won’t believe your eyes.

It is particularly to the Tabitha window I would direct your attention today. It appears at first glance to be a window typical of those devoted to the Adoration of Mary. She is surrounded by a collection of people kneeling and offering prayer to her. An unusual window for a Presbyterian church.

On closer investigation, Mary seems to be holding not the baby Jesus, as would normally be expected, but a tray of some kind, upon which is a number of loaves of bread (or a boiled beaver, it looks like to me, in a nod to Canadian content). She is offering bread to the woman kneeling in front of her. Upon closer investigation yet, made possible only by making your way up to the loft and looking up close, you read the following Scripture verse right at the bottom of the window:

(Acts 9:36 KJV) Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.

Oho! So it is not Mary at all, but Tabitha, and the window is depicting her distributing food to the poor. And if the poor in our window appear well dressed, that is doubtless because, as we learned in our reading, Tabitha not only provided food for the poor, but made clothes for them too. The window is celebrating this good woman, and the good works and charity which typified her life.

I don't blame you if Tabitha is not a familiar name to you from Scripture; after all, her story is soon taken over by Peter, who, as we heard in the reading from earlier, is used by God to restore this wonderful woman to life. But astonishing and inspiring though Tabitha's resurrection is, it is her introduction to us that inspires me, back to which I want to turn your attention. Our window, and the verse below it, describes her, in good King James English, as "*full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.*" Other translations tell it this way:

(NASB) - this woman was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did.

(New Living Translation) - She was always doing kind things for others and helping the poor.

(NRSV) - She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

(English Standard Version) - She was full of good works and acts of charity.

(Rollwage) - "She was filled with good works and helping the poor, which she always did."

"Filled with good works and helping." Notice it doesn't say, "drained by good works and helping." It says, "Filled." Filled with good works. Filled with helping, which she always did. Filled.

This scripture, this description, is the antidote to the common misperception many of us have, which says, "when you help someone, when you share, when you give, you lose. Keep everything for yourself, it's the only way to get ahead." But here is Tabitha, "filled with good works." She wasn't diminished by what she did, by whom she helped. She was filled. Filled with what? With the incredible riches of God's grace. And there is no treasure that can even come close to that.

The good news isn't only that there are living, breathing Tabitha's in our midst, in our lives – and here are: people who have helped us through a hard time by unselfishly giving of themselves. That's good news, yes. But it is also good news that the same principle which filled Tabitha's life can still be at work in ours today: that when we unselfishly give of our time, talents and resources to contribute to the work of God, to encourage another, to build up the Body, to help the needy, to reach out in compassion, we aren't diminished. We are filled. The more we give of ourselves, the more we share of what has been entrusted to us, the more God fills our lives with goodness and with grace.

How does this work? How can we get filled by giving? Well, think of it in terms of love. When you are giving to those in need, when you are engaging in good works, when you are feeding the hungry, when you are visiting the lonely, what you are really giving, really expressing, really sharing, is love. And if Jesus is to be believed, the more love you give, the more love you get. If you are nasty to people, mean to people, critical of people, you'll get that in return – maybe not to your face, but undoubtedly behind your back. But when you are loving to people – kind, considerate, generous – you'll get that back too. People respond to love with love. And guess what? So does God.

When your life, like that of Tabitha, is characterised by good works, by unselfish generosity of time, talents and resources, you had better prepare to be blessed. It never says in the Bible that “God helps those who help themselves.” It does say, over and again, *“God brings blessing to those who bless others.”*

We have the joy of ordaining and welcoming eight new Elders to our Session today. These fine people, elected and affirmed by you, have been recognised by you as possessing gifts of leadership, vision, compassion and care. And you have recognised these gifts in them, because you have seen them at work. Their activity in the life of our congregation has revealed to you who they are, and in electing them as Elders, you have said, “Those are the sort of people we need.” People, like Tabitha, *“Filled with good works and helping.”*

As we ordain them as Elders, we pray that they will be a blessing to our congregation, and we to them; that the light of God's love will shine brightly through them, leading them, guiding them, inspiring us all to be filled with good works and helping; that just as these glorious windows, renewed and restored, shine brightly with the story of faith, our congregation would continue to be renewed, restored in the heritage of faith which has been entrusted to us, which we strive to bring to our community and world today; a living witness which will continue to shine brightly into the future, that this generation and the next will come to know Christ, and to make him known.

“Filled with good works and helping.” Stronger, renewed, ever more transparent, the light of God's love shining for all to see. It is true of Tabitha; may it be said of us all. Amen.

