

“Ordinary Disciples”

May 12, 2019

Confirmation Sunday/4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 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. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since 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.’ ³⁹So 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. ⁴⁰Peter 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. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The February issue of National Geographic magazine featured a cover that pulled me in. It is a shot of a sheer rock face with a tiny human figure nestled in a crevice with the tag line “THE ULTIMATE CLIMB”. Once I had a chance to finally crack open the edition and read the cover story, I was swept up in the tale of Alex Hannold who free-climbed the famous rock formation, El Capitan, in Yosemite National Park in one fell swoop. What a story! What an accomplishment! What an adventure! But there’s another story within the pages of the February 2019 issue that also pulled me in. Less attention-grabbing, but very interesting, it is the story of Henry Heinz and his ketchup empire. I don’t know if you are aware, because I sure wasn’t, of ketchup’s less than stellar beginnings. Ketchup was

originally made of such unwholesome ingredients as rough and rotten tomato skins, thick and tough pumpkin rinds, and the remnants of left-behind apples (stem, core, seeds and all) after they had been pressed into juice. One famous French food writer from the 1800's described it as, "filthy, decomposed and putrid."¹ Back then, I don't many of us would have been caught dead dipping our favorite waffle fries into that stuff!

Henry Heinz's business didn't actually begin with ketchup, instead it began humbly with a teenager's garden and horseradish in glass jars, so that customers could see the quality of what they were getting when they bought it. Heinz was passionate about cleanliness and trustworthiness. He believed that both were integral to a successful business in the food industry. So, when the Heinz company began to sell ketchup, Henry Heinz went about reforming the product's image and ingredients. Early American versions of ketchup were known to be watery, susceptible to mold and bacteria, and to occasionally cause a consumer to become ill. The versions that were safe were so because they were literally "doused in chemical preservatives". When rumors began to swirl that these preservatives were dangerous and unhealthy, Heinz listened and responded with another goal – to be a "leader in preservative-free products"². Many warned him that this would be impossible at worst, prohibitively expensive at best. But Heinz was undeterred. He worked with a scientist friend to find the right blend of ingredients that would ensure that ketchup tasted good, had a decent shelf-life, looked good in the bottle, and was, indeed, good for his customers. If not for Heinz, we would not have the version of ketchup that most of us enjoy today – a thick, tomato-rich condiment with just the right balance of vinegary goodness. Heinz's legacy doesn't stop with ketchup, though. Without him and his advocacy for food safety, we wouldn't have many of the FDA standards that we do today and more of us would risk getting sick every time we purchase a product in the store or enjoy a meal outside of our own homes.

¹ "How Henry Heinz used ketchup to improve food safety," [National Geographic Magazine](#), Feb. 2019.

² "How Henry Heinz used ketchup to improve food safety," [National Geographic Magazine](#), Feb. 2019.

Until his death, Henry Heinz was an advocate for food safety among politicians and in the public eye, using his voice and influence for good. Putting good above the cost ended up paying off for him in the end.

What I've yet to tell you about Henry Heinz is this – he was a Christian, and a very devout one at that. The eldest of eight children from a family of German immigrants, his parents raised him as an 'every Sunday' type of Lutheran. His mother was constantly reinforcing Christian principles into the raising of her children with her most famous saying being, "Do all the good you can. Do not live for yourself." So, Heinz's empire and all of the good he did for food quality standards and safety in our country was not just because – it was because he was a Christian. He lived his faith out and was, at times, bold in his discipleship. It may seem mundane or ordinary to us that he insisted upon clear glass jars for his products or that he opened his factory doors to the public so that consumers could see how things were made and how workers were treated, but in the grand scheme of things it is not. Heinz lived in the age of Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle" which revealed horrifying practices in the meat industry and in a time where the reigning theme in food service was 'quantity over quality'. Henry Heinz boldly stood for Christian principles in all aspects of his life, but most obviously in his business endeavors.

There is something about Acts 9 that reminds me of that February 2019 issue of National Geographic. One is pulled in by the exciting story that takes place in verses 1-31 of Pharisee Saul turned Apostle Paul. Saul, the well-born and devout Jew who persecuted new Christians via threats and murder, encounters the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus and has a conversion experience in which he becomes a Christian re-named Paul who will change the face of Christianity forever. Within these verses there is flashing light from heaven and temporary blindness, spiritual visions and a miraculous healing. But if you keep reading, you come to the less attention-grabbing story of a woman named Tabitha that is quite interesting. Now, something miraculous happens to Tabitha, too - she is raised from the dead, but her story is shorter and more to the point, with less drama and side characters than Paul's. At first glance, one might not grasp all that is going on in Tabitha's story. Why is her life important enough to resurrect?

As we investigate her story further, dig a little deeper, and examine the nuances of the verses that share her story, we can discover some poignant details about Tabitha, her witness, and her importance to the early church.

1. First of all, Joppa, the town which Tabitha called home and also the place where the prophet Jonah fled to in fear of God's call, is the only Christian community that we hear about in the entire book of Acts that is in the region of Galilee. If you remember, Galilee was Jesus' home region, but much of the story of the early church post Jesus' ascension has to do with the church as it spread throughout the Mediterranean region, beyond tiny little Galilee. The fact that Tabitha is from Jesus' home region probably means that she has been a follower, or disciple for a longer time than most...she's been in on this movement since its beginning.
2. Secondly, when Tabitha is referred to as a disciple in this passage, the feminine form of that noun is used. Ancient Greek, much like other languages y'all might be familiar with, genders all of its nouns as either male or female. Nowhere else in the entire Bible, save this instance, does the feminine form of disciple show up. This means something. It means that Tabitha is worthy. That she is making a difference in God's kingdom. It means that women have a place in this new community that is established in the name of the risen Christ.
3. A third detail that arises from a close reading of Tabitha's story is the presence of the widows. The widows here aren't just thrown in as random characters. They signify that Tabitha worked with them and for them and in service to them. Their showing of garments is a witness to the community of the most basic need that Tabitha supplied for them – clothing. Throughout Scripture, those who help widows and orphans are considered the most highly faithful and the most in line with God's desires for justice. In the words of Will Willimon, Tabitha's death, "has caused a crisis in the community."³ So what do all of these details mean? Are they just interesting tidbits, or can they really help us as we seek to live out the faith of Christ in a time and place far away from first century Galilee?

³ Will Willimon, "Acts," Interpretation Bible Series, 1988.

The thing that has stuck with me the most about Tabitha's story is this – she's an ordinary disciple living in an extraordinary time. The term *ordinary* has particular significance for us as liturgically-minded Presbyterians. Right now, I am wearing a white stole and the parament here on the pulpit is white. These things signify that we are in a high holy season – the one of Easter. Eastertide, which is far from ordinary, lasts for seven weeks, from Easter Sunday until Pentecost. Then, following Pentecost on June 9th, we will be in Ordinary Time, which will last until late fall. You may remember that throughout 2019, we have been preaching from the lectionary on Sunday mornings.

This means that we follow a three-year cycle of prescribed readings for each week. This cycle, which follows the liturgical calendar, is supposed to offer those who follow it a full view of the breadth of Scriptural witness over the course of 3 years. So, when we follow the lectionary in Eastertide (as opposed to ordinary time), we hear a lot of miraculous stories that have to do with “the power God let loose in the world in the resurrection.”⁴ Now, I'm not saying that Tabitha's story isn't extraordinary or miraculous in some ways. But it is seemingly ordinary. A friend of mine who is a retired pastor from Durham, North Carolina, says this about Tabitha,

“Have you ever met Tabitha? I have known her in every church I have ever served. She has not wealth or power except her deep and abiding commitment to give expression to God's compassion for those who are in need. She is tenacious about practicing her faith by serving others. She prays a simple prayer: ‘Lord, help us to help those in need, and make us sensitive to what they really need.’ Tabitha's work is too important to die, and I am grateful that the story records God's agreement as well, by empowering Peter to keep her alive. Tabitha is still alive in almost every church I know.”⁵

⁴ Joe Harvard, “Pastoral Perspective on the Fourth Sunday of Easter” in [Feasting on the Word, Year C – Lent through Eastertide](#).

⁵ Joe Harvard, “Pastoral Perspective on the Fourth Sunday of Easter” in [Feasting on the Word, Year C – Lent through Eastertide](#)

I'm still fascinated by the story of Alex Hannold free climbing El Capitan. In the movie about his climb that hit theaters in 2018, Alex spoke of stepping outside of his fear to accomplish such a feat. I'm also fascinated and captivated by the conversion of Paul at the beginning of Acts and how his life and witness meant so much to the success and spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. He, too, had to step outside of his own fear and societal expectations to do what he did. But what encourages just as much, and maybe more, in my faith and serves as an example of bold discipleship are the stories of Henry Heinz and Tabitha of Joppa. Very ordinary disciples living in extraordinary times. Unlike Paul and Alex, these two were planted – one in a small Galilean town; one in an industry. They made a difference in particular communities. They mattered to the people they worked with, served with, and interacted with, on a daily basis. But because their stories occurred in extraordinary times and point to the power of God let loose in the resurrection, they endure. And they move beyond the communities in which they were planted. There might be someone in this sanctuary today who is an Apostle Paul or an Alex Hannold. Who will consistently be extraordinary. And I hope their stories encourage you. But most of us are more like Tabitha and Henry – faithfully ordinary.

Striving to live out our faith day in, and day out. Reminding ourselves over and over again what it means to be in a community. Responding to the grace of Jesus Christ with good works and acts of charity by doing all the good we can and not only serving ourselves.

And these good works can be as ordinary as glass bottles for condiments and clothing given to the most vulnerable in our community. What we cannot forget is this – that because of Easter Sunday and that gloriously empty tomb – we, too, are living in extraordinary times where the power of the resurrected Christ has been let loose in the world. And no one can ever stop it. We're living in these times even when there are green paraments on our pulpit and green stoles around the necks of your preachers. Even when it doesn't feel so extraordinary. No one can ever stop the power of the empty tomb. But we can always become a part of it, as those who claim their place as disciples of the risen Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.