

Life at a Funeral
Acts 9:36-43
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I've officiated at a lot of funeral sermons in my career so far, 158 to be exact. Some of them have been incredibly difficult, like the funeral sermon for the little Emma Hope Short, a two-year-old who died of a brain tumor. Most of them have been times of celebration, like my last funeral, which was for sweet Alice Hays, a long-time member of our congregation. But the most difficult funeral sermon I ever preached was for a man named Stan.

Stan's funeral sermon was challenging for two reasons. First, Stan was an ornery son-of-a-gun. It was hard to find a lot of people who had something nice to say about Stan. Many people who knew Stan echoed Mark Twain, who said, "I didn't attend the funeral, but I sent a nice letter saying I approved of it." As I started to write about Stan, I realized that I may just have to make stuff up. The second reason that Stan's funeral sermon was so difficult was that Stan wasn't dead yet. This was an assignment in my seminary class, to preach a funeral sermon for someone who we would find difficult eulogizing.

As I was working on this assignment, a thought struck me that still nags at me to this day. What if this assignment is given in the future now to a seminary student? The student is told to write a funeral sermon about a person for whom it would be difficult to come up with five minutes of positive material, and the person the student chooses to kill is...me? What if I'm Stan for someone else? Am I living my life and following Jesus in such a way that when I die, the preacher won't have to make stuff up?

We're continuing our sermon series on the book of Acts today, as we look at how we moved from the death and resurrection of Jesus to a movement that will eventually become what we know as Christianity. At this point in the story, we've just witnessed the conversion of Paul, a persecutor of Christ-followers who will become the greatest evangelist for the gospel. But Paul needs to lay low for a while, so the story turns its attention to another prominent preacher, the apostle Peter, and his efforts to spread the good news.

In our story this morning, we meet Tabitha, a lady living in the town of Joppa. Unfortunately, we don't meet her for long because we're told in the second verse she gets sick and dies, so our passage today is sort of a eulogy for Tabitha in which we learn a few things about her. First, Luke, who is the author of Acts, calls her a disciple. We might be tempted to gloss over this description, but to the early readers it would have revelatory. The Greek word Luke chooses here for "disciple" is a word that is used exclusively in the New Testament for men, except for here. Tabitha is the only female who is called by the male form of "disciple." This is a woman who was exemplary in her faith.

Luke also tells us Tabitha was devoted to good works and acts of charity. She didn't do these in her spare time or when she had a free moment. She was devoted to it. Her specific ministry was sewing. She made tunics and other clothing for the poor and widowed in Joppa. You don't hear of many people sewing tunics anymore, but I can attest to sewing being a spiritual gift because I knew Nancy. In my last church, each year during Vacation Bible School the kids would each make a quilt square and then Nancy would take all the squares and fashion them into a beautiful quilt to be auctioned off, with the proceeds benefiting the church's outreach ministries. Each stitch of that quilt was saturated with Nancy's dedication, just as the widows'

tunics were held together, not only with seams and threads, but with Tabitha's Christ-like love and commitment to serving others.

Tabitha was devoted to making a difference...until she got sick and died. That's all we know. No explanation, no excuses. Life happens. People get sick and die, even people we love, people we hope will live forever, people who change lives. Tabitha's body is cleaned up and prepared for burial. Word had spread that Peter, one of Jesus' followers, was in the area, so some of Tabitha's friends asked if Peter could come over without delay.

When Peter arrives, a group of widows that Tabitha served through her ministry is gathered around her. They are weeping and showing Peter the tunics Tabitha had made them. I'm imagining that Tabitha was the matriarch of this group of widows, calling them together each week, like a first-century quilting bee. They would sit in a circle, sewing and crocheting and doing needlepoint. They would talk about the pastor's sermon last Sunday or the price of bread in the market or Miriam's new haircut. This group of widows, who lost so much with the death of their husbands, had found new purpose and hope in Tabitha, who used her gifts to serve others. The widows wept for Tabitha, not because of what she had said to them, but because of what she had done for them, who she was for them.

This scene takes me back to Stan's hypothetical funeral. I couldn't imagine anyone crying because Stan was gone. In fact, a few people may have raised a glass or at least breathed a sigh of relief. When we die, will people cry because of the void we have left? I'm not talking about our family, they are supposed to miss us, even the Stans among us. But what about other folks? Will the poor and the widows gather to mourn our loss? Will the community acknowledge the impact we have made?

I think about that when I think about this church. Every night I'm here for a meeting, the Mission Center is buzzing with basketball or a camera club or a community meeting. What would happen if Crestwood died tomorrow? Would anyone weep for us? Would anyone even know we were gone? I'd like to think so. I hope we'd be missed by the Parkinson's Support Group and the Boy Scouts and the AA groups and by everyone else who uses this facility each week. I hope we'd be mourned by the Hope Center and Step by Step and Arbor Youth Services and all the organizations we serve in our community. I hope we'd be missed by the widows we care for, the shut-ins we visit, people we feed through our Blessing Box. Of course, we can only do those things if you help us do those things. We can only be God's hands and feet in this community if you use your hands and feet to make it happen.

If you've been in my office, you know I have a big collection of Cincinnati Reds bobbleheads. Over the years I've collected dozens of them, and I display them proudly on a bookshelf in my office because when I was married I was told they didn't quite match my décor at home and now I'm too lazy to move them. They are usually the first thing people notice when they walk in. But I hope, when I die or when a seminary student kills me in a funeral sermon, that I'm not remembered for my bobblehead collection. Because what I learn from Tabitha is that our legacy is not made by what we own. Our legacy is made by what we give away.

So, I take to heart Peter's words spoken to Tabitha. After he surveys the scene, he clears the room and repeats the words he heard when he saw Jesus perform a resurrection: "Get up!" That's not a request or a plea; it's a divine command. I believe those words are being spoken to us today, not because we are dead, but because there are people in this world that think Jesus is. The church is being portrayed in our culture today in ways that make people think Jesus abandoned it a long time ago. If the church isn't out in the world being the light and love of Christ, what evidence is there that Jesus is really alive? Some words in a book? A gathering of

people on Sunday morning? This isn't the evidence we have to show others that Jesus' resurrection was real. No, that evidence is found in the way we live out that resurrection for the sake of others. If we're not putting our faith into action to serve God and change lives, then what's the point of our faith in the first place? Is it just to make sure we get to Heaven? Is that the best we have to offer this world?

There are so many ways we are encouraged to put our gifts to use to serve Christ here at Crestwood. The opportunities are as varied as the gifts represented in this room, from swinging a hammer to singing a note to holding babies to studying scripture to loving on kids at Vacation Bible School. We try not to put boundaries around the ways we serve God. Instead, we try to open doors for you to do so. So, I encourage you to pray about how you can use your gifts to testify to God's living presence in your life and in this world. The world doesn't need another church full of audience members who sit quietly and passively take in God's word. This world needs a church full of actors, people in whom God's word takes root and bears fruit, people who are willing to plug into the power source that is the Holy Spirit and be energized to serve in God's name. What can you give away to someone else that will not only be your legacy but will be evidence of the living Christ among us?

There's a lot to say about Tabitha in these six verses. It makes for a great eulogy. If someone had six verses in which to write about us, what would they say? I hope they would say something about the lives we touched and the witness we gave. I hope they would say we had such a positive impact on others that we would be missed. I hope they would say the way we lived inspired others to serve and the way we died inspired others to believe. And if they wouldn't say those things about us, if we're worried that our lives are passing us by, if we're afraid of becoming the subject of a seminary student's funeral sermon, today is the day to start glorifying God through the way we live. Today is the day to get up and do something about it.