

“Will We Support or Diminish Each Other’s Lives?”

Friends, longtime and new, each of us sourced by the fathomless Love that is God, please pray with me. *O God, our mighty and gentle shepherd, refresh our souls this day. Even as we are surrounded by shadows of Death, may your presence with us dispel our fear of danger.* As you move within and among us this morning, stirring our emotions and our thoughts as we consider how we will support or diminish each other’s lives, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Fellow travelers along the intersecting paths of our lives, fellow lovers of the possibilities and experiences of resurrection love, we are living in time when persons in power are seeking to maintain their power over others by orchestrating death and diminishing life. Autocratic Russian president Vladimir Putin it is perpetrating a devastating genocide in Ukraine in an attempt to expand his control of the living, breathing land by erasing a people group.

Our US Supreme Court, composed primarily of men, intends to seek next month to diminish the lives of millions of women in the present and future by stripping us of our right to manage our own reproductive health, thus reinforcing a centuries-old standard in this land of men giving themselves permission to disempower, confine and control women.

Wherever you find yourself on the gender spectrum, know that there ARE strong-hearted, fear-opposing people who are ready to rise up with us against the evil of insecure, fear-based oppression and violent behaviors by bullies, be they an international tyrant or a person in your household or family system.

And there ARE strong-hearted, fear-opposing people who are ready to rise up with us against the evils of supremely injudicious dictated misogyny in the form relegating women to less than full citizenship.

We sure need a counter-narrative to encourage and embolden us to support life during these death-dealing, life-diminishing times. Thank God for Jesus, the ways he modeled love, and the many faithful attempts to follow his example ever since that first century CE.

As we meditate on today's focus text about a woman named Tabitha, I will invite you to close your eyes two times as I read an excerpt from it. As you close your eyes now a first time and hear again a brief portion of the reading, listen as though you were a person living in Joppa and part of Tabitha's synagogue – someone who knew her fairly well and to whom she had shown abundant kindness. We heard: *“Now in Joppa, there was a disciple, a woman named Tabitha— ‘Dorcas,’ in Greek—who never tired of doing kind things or giving to charity. About this time she grew ill and died. They washed her body and laid her out in an upstairs room... Upon [Peter's] arrival, they took him upstairs to the room. All the townswomen who had been widowed stood beside him weeping, and showed him the various garments Dorcas had made when she was still with them.”*

This vignette from the book of the Acts of the Apostles testifies to the powerful impact that one woman's love had on many individuals and on the character of an entire community. This morning, I invite you to wonder how this story might speak to your own life in two different ways.

First, encouraging you to think either of your own mother or another nurturing person in your life, I wonder: **Who is one person who has had a positive impact on your life because their ways of demonstrating love or care have supported your life more often than diminishing it?**

As you move through this day, return to that person in your mind's eye, noting how they have specifically supported your aliveness. Not all of us are practiced and fluent in offering specific statements of appreciation. We fear feeling awkward or causing the person we love to feel awkward. I hope that you will choose to tell that person you've thought of exactly how their love or care or way of being has affected you. Write it down, then call or send it in the mail. Do it today; don't wait.

I invite you to close your eyes again. As I read the excerpt a second time, listen as though you were a person who had hear of Tabitha but never interacted with her. Imagine yourself as an outsider looking in, one whose circle of friends did not directly overlap with Tabitha's. We heard: *"Now in Joppa, there was a disciple, a woman named Tabitha— 'Dorcas,' in Greek—who never tired of doing kind things or giving to charity. About this time she grew ill and died. They washed her body and laid her out in an upstairs room... Upon [Peter's] arrival, they took him upstairs to the room. All the townswomen who had been widowed stood beside him weeping, and showed him the various garments Dorcas had made when she was still with them."*

In addition to testifying to the impact that one woman's caring actions had on many individuals, today's reading also testifies to the comfort and courage people can find in gathered community. Now I encourage you to wonder: **How has this church been a source of comfort or courage for you as you face the demands of showing up in your day-to-day movements in this world? How has this church supported your aliveness more than diminishing it?** If you are not finding comfort, encouragement, or fullness of life within our congregation, please reach out to me or to someone else with whom you feel comfortable.

And if you do find yourself sourced with comfort, courage, and life support as you participate with us in worship and faith formation, fellowship and acts of justice-building in our wider St. Croix Valley community, then I invite you to wonder: Who might you invite to experience our life-supporting work with you. Our current congregation is full of examples of people who have become involved with People's Congregational Church because a friend invited them to come and try us out.

I was struck by a quote I read this week, which someone had paired with today's reading about Tabitha and her community. Sister Joan Chittister, present day American Benedictine nun, theologian and author has written this: "*The death of Jesus left a fledgling faith community bereft until they themselves rose out of his grave to begin life over again, wiser for what they knew, stronger for what he was, determined now to finish what had already been begun. All things end so that something else can begin.*" Words from wise Sister Joan Chittister.

Today's story occurred within decades (possibly within the first few years) after Jesus' death and resurrection. People were traumatized by his execution as a political enemy of the Roman empire. People were confused about how he could continue to be their leader, their savior, their teacher and friend beyond his death, resurrection and eventual vanishing from their Earthly sight. Sister Chittister's words are challenging and they are true. Depending on how you understand God's power, it may not be that all things end so that something else can being. But it is certainly true that when something ends, something else might begin.

As Tabitha's friends gathered at her bedside, they were deeply concerned. Then they grieved at her death and tended lovingly to her body, wondering how they would move forward without her.

By power beyond our imagining, Tabitha returned from death to continue living among them. I imagine they all felt a new lease on life in that moment.

What are you grieving in your life – what death of a loved one, what loss of a job, what loss of a relationship, what losses of ability associated with aging, what loss of a friend moving away or becoming otherwise distant? And what new thing might be coming your way – not to replace who or what you have lost, but to fill up other parts of you heart and mind to energize you in new ways?

What does it take for us to become participants in resurrection – in new opportunities to live as our truest selves, grounded in our identity as children of God, reflecting the beloved image of God that shines out from each neighbor with whom we cross paths? Rev. Stephen D. Jones, a Baptist pastor in Missouri, writes this: *“God’s Spirit will intervene on behalf of our prayers, yet the healing that comes often surprises us and causes us to catch our collective breath...Communal healing requires that we overcome the intense privacy and individualism that are the cultural icons of our day”* (writes Rev. Stephen D. Jones).

If we are to be countercultural followers of Jesus, we need to nurture within ourselves and among each other brave vulnerability and grace. Theologian, author, poet, and teacher Frederick Buechner once said this about countercultural brave vulnerability – Buechner wrote: *“When it comes to putting broken lives back together... the human best tends to be at odds with the holy best. To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do—to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst—is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still.*

The trouble with steeling yourself against the harshness of reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from.” Wise words from Frederick Buechner.

Opportunities abound, friends, to embody our communal calling to be a resurrection people, supporting life much more often than we diminish it. Remember, let that influential person you saw earlier in your mind’s eye know how she or they have supported your life – don’t wait!

We can be loving, vulnerable and brave. Love is counting on us. Amen!

Rev. Clare Gromoll
People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
May 8, 2022 (Mother’s Day, 4th Sunday of Easter)
Acts 9:36-43, Psalm 23