

Holy Resistance

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

May 12, 2019

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Look at this passage in the book of Acts a little closer and you will notice two things about the woman who in today's reading has died, and Peter is called in to intervene with – first, she has not one, but two, names, for the writer Luke tells us that she:

was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas.

Tabitha is her Aramaic name that grounds her in her heritage with her ancestors Abraham and Sarah along with her commitment as a follower of Jesus, but she lived under the dominating Roman Empire that privileges people who speak a particular language, Greek. So "Dorcas" is her Greek name. She has what one Bible scholar calls a bicultural identity.¹

We also hear what seems to be her resume as Peter arrives, for it seems she might have made clothing to earn a living. Her Greek identity allowed her the latitude to, again it seems, resist the Roman system of control by making clothing for women who are most vulnerable. Luke usually tells us little about the people for whom God's healing, resurrecting power, will be demonstrated. We are to wonder here why we know more about Tabitha.

Tabitha, also known as Dorcas, nurtures two identities; one to accommodate the oppressive system she lives in, while the other identity is where her roots run deep. This is a story of God sending a message of Holy Resistance, and specifically a message of resurrection hope to all those who were on the margins, cared for by Tabitha. What is the message be for us in our modern time?

Maybe to start, we might see the context; a story set in a world of great privilege. Perhaps this is an opportunity to reflect on the system of privilege in our modern world; do we relate with Tabitha, even ourselves having to be savvy, adopting multiple "identities" as we accommodate the forces that oppress, or, do you enjoy some substantial privilege as I do?

Let me share a story that helped me to appreciate modern-day examples of people who have had to nurture multiple identities in order to navigate their world. For three months I lived and worked among Palestinians in the West Bank. Most of my work was to observe and chronicle the burdens Palestinians carry under the weight of Israeli occupation. I especially noted the remarkable ingenuity many showed, living constructive lives even as they actively resisted Israel's controls. Violence would have been easier, peace and working for justice much more difficult.

Daily, Palestinians lead two disparate lives: *in their homes*, for the most part, they speak Arabic and enjoy the love of family, and their lives interwoven with the larger village or town. *Outside their homes requires their second identity*, for to be a Palestinian driving anywhere requires hypervigilance, watching out for the inevitable Israeli checkpoints.

¹ Seasons of the Spirit, Fusion.

When encountering Israeli officials imposing on Palestinian territory, Palestinians become non-person, their identity one of submissiveness for fear of arrest or being shot.

I would frequently ride the bus among the villages of Palestine, and inevitably we would be stopped at some checkpoint. Passengers might be ordered out of the bus, where an Israeli officer barked directives in Hebrew. I pull out my passport, the officer raises her hand to stop me – she is not concerned about me. The interrogation happens as she moves from Palestinian passenger to passenger – *always in the language, cultural norms of the Hebrew occupying, dominant culture.*

I already understood my privilege in this world before these moments, but after experiences like these, I was angry.

What can I do to change the reality for those Palestinians? I did find a few ways to show my solidarity. I suggest that Luke tells a story today in the book of Acts about how God showed solidarity with Tabitha, herself oppressed, and even more so, raising Tabitha was a sign of God's Holy Resistance for those who depended on Tabitha.

I recognize my privilege. Some of you may also. Others of you may connect with Tabitha's reality, having to be savvy, to accommodate, to adapt, in order to navigate our complex world and its systems of privilege. Even here in Canada, a liberal democracy where our social safety net generally supports the most vulnerable. I would have a hard time telling that to Phil.

Phil, I met last week, having to leave my safe place for oh such a short moment, but one long enough for Phil to catch my attention. It seemed quite obvious to me upon first glance that this articulate man had neither stable housing nor any access to other necessities of life. I wondered, as his story poured out, and his plea for help: Was I seen by him as an agent of the oppressive empire that leaves Phil to languish? Where is God in all of this – in the system that lets Phil suffer, and in my conversation with him? Can you relate to a moment like this?

The dramatic Gospel storyteller of Luke and the book of Acts clearly wants us to know, unequivocally, that God gets it. This is Good News for Tabitha and the powerless, voiceless, women that she ministered to – God did not abandon them! Peter's act on God's behalf is nothing short of Holy Resistance.

There is also some uncomfortable Good News in this radical message for me and anyone in positions of authority.

God dabbles in politics.

At least "politics" as I understand it, defined for me a number of years ago as *what happens whenever we have two conflicting narratives or ideologies in conversation.* In the Hebrew Scriptures through the prophets and in the Christian Scriptures through Jesus and the disciples, God is always engaging in politics, challenging the narrative that the people in power spin. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the children of Israel are taught that love of God and neighbour were essential, but there is most definitely a particular burden placed upon the people with the greatest privilege and authority to care for the most vulnerable – the widow and orphan. When people in religious authority neglect their responsibility, the conversation quickly feels political.

Jesus brought a modern lens to that very same teaching. In the Bible, time and again, God shows the principalities and powers that death and despair will never ultimately win. Hope and love will always triumph over hatred, ultimately. It may take time; often the time it takes for regular people like Peter to finally believe that God needs them to be instruments of holy resistance. You and I take time, believing that WE TOO, can be messengers of God's Holy Resistance.

God's holy resistance works on our walls, as our cold, fearful, cynical hearts open up to the stories of the "Phils" around us - as we prayerfully listen for a vision of how our gifts can be used to perform miracles. "Miracles" as the unimaginable moments that unfold when Love displaces our doubt, when the walls of privilege crumble. Those miracles are not confined to ancient Biblical times, friends.

Let me end with a story: Oscar Romero was an authoritative man with a dual identity. He came to see his identity as a Christian as at odds with his identity as an authoritative Bishop, part of the religious elite in El Salvador. He made a choice to risk his comfort and safety by speaking truth. He famously said, "When I feed the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are poor, they call me a communist." He was killed while presiding at Communion, killed for his passion for justice and care of the needy. Romero's is a resurrection story - his name forever synonymous with God's work to liberate those who suffer under political and religious tyranny.

God cares, and shows that care, over and over again.

Holy Resistance happens primarily through and for people like you and through me. Amen.