

“Saying Little, Doing Much” – Acts 9:36-43 – Easter 4 – Apr 29, 2007

You know that for the past few weeks I’ve been preaching on the reading from Acts. The lectionary offers a series of seven readings from that book of the New Testament, and the series presents a fascinating glimpse into the developments in the new and growing faith. Those of you who have been paying close attention will note that I’ve thrown in a “pop quiz” a couple of times, and today is no different. Today’s quiz question is, “did you catch the throw-away line?” It’s possibly the most important verse in the reading, but it seems to get thrown away. I’ll get to it in a bit, but let’s take a look at what’s happening in this reading.

Last week we saw the start of Paul’s ministry – his conversion, his recovery from blindness, and then off he went to create the church. Well, at least that’s one side of the story. There is a second “official” story of who founded the church, and this is part of it. This is the story that features not Paul but Peter – also going on to create the church. We see that dispute in scripture, with even some strong hints that Paul had a franchise from the family firm “Jesus, Inc.” – James, Jesus’ brother along with Peter and John in Jerusalem – to evangelize among the gentiles. That he was spectacularly successful in doing so meant that Peter’s claim to bring the faith to the gentiles needed to be emphasized, or at least told. That’s the context of today’s reading, showing the start of Peter’s authenticated ministry.

Actually, it’s not really the start. If you read a few verses before our text for today you’d have read about Peter curing a man, Aeneas, who lived in Lydda and who had been paralyzed for eight years. According to the text, all the people in Lydda and Sharon saw this and “turned to the Lord.” This is where we enter the incident we read about. A faithful believer, a woman whose name was Tabitha in Aramaic, or Dorcas in Greek – both mean *gazelle* – had died. We aren’t told what the cause of death was, although you CSI fans will note that she became ill first and so her death wasn’t suspicious.

Her death, however, was devastating to those around her. Dorcas had obviously been a generous and hard-working person, evidenced by the tunics and other clothing that the grieving widows showed Peter. Remember, in those days, personal life insurance was rare, pensions were only for the military and politicians – widows largely relied upon the charity of others for the basics of life. A person like Dorcas who gave so generously to support the widows was a saint indeed, and such saints are sorely missed when they depart this life.

The widows did what they could in return and prepared her body for the funeral rites. They heard that Peter was nearby, as Joppa was on the coast about 16 Km (10 miles) from Lydda, so they sent for him. We’re not told what they expected of him, only that he was urged to come as quickly as possible. Even when Peter arrived, we don’t know what they asked him to do, other than sending him upstairs to where the body lay and the widows were grieving.

Without being asked, Peter knew what to do – after all, he’d been in this kind of situation before. Do you remember the incident of Jesus healing Jairus’ daughter? (Luke 8:40-56) If you recall, Jairus had begged Jesus to come and heal his deathly sick daughter, and as Jesus and the disciples headed to his house they were surrounded by a huge crowd. In the crowd a woman touched the fringes of Jesus’ clothes in the crowd and was healed by that touch. Jesus sensed what had happened and asked who had done it – and Peter tried to convince him it was just a case of being bumped in the crowd. But the woman was identified, and just as Jesus was affirming her healing because of her faith, he was interrupted by someone who said not to bother, the daughter had died.

But Jesus persisted, they entered the house, went upstairs, closed the door – with only James, John and Peter in the room with Jesus. Interesting detail in that story – “and they (James, John, and Peter) laughed at him, knowing she was dead.” Jesus calls the girl to get up, she does, and all rejoice, except that the parents are instructed to tell no one about these events.

Back to Peter in Joppa – upstairs, with the deceased, the door is closed, this time nobody but Peter – and nobody’s laughing this time. Instead, reminiscent of Elisha raising the Shunammite woman’s son, Peter prays, and calls Dorcas – Tabitha – to get up. She does, and all rejoice. Peter, who usually preaches, this time says little, but does much, and brings Dorcas back to life and to those who loved her – especially to the widows who depended so much upon her.

What a difference from the previous incident! This time no laughing, no scorn from Peter. This time the responsibility is on him, but this time Peter – Peter of the three denials – this time he knows that the power of Jesus is not only sufficient to do this but is continuing with him. This is no mere replay of what had happened, because so much is different now. So much has come clear with all that has gone on since that previous time, especially the death and resurrection of Jesus. So much of what Jesus said is now understandable to Peter, and to the others. It has become so clear to them that the promises Jesus made about being with them forever have come true and the benefits to the church as a whole and to the faithful like Dorcas are so evident in this incident. Many in Joppa came to believe as a result of what happened.

But there’s something else that’s coming clear, and that relates to a huge difference starting in Peter. Remember I asked about that “throw-away” line? Have you spotted it yet? Yes, it’s the last line of the reading: “Meanwhile [Peter] stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.” Seems like a simple little filler to end this dramatic story, doesn’t it? “Meanwhile, yadda, yadda ...” But stop for a second to think about what it’s saying. First, it’s talking about Peter. Strong, conservative, orthodox Peter. Peter is the one who seems to be either running the family firm in Jerusalem, or is at least the prime spokesman. Jewish Christian Peter, not easily swayed or changed by new trends. And then there’s the place – Joppa. Joppa was a coast city, the closest port to Jerusalem, and like all cities and towns on the coast of the Mediterranean was very much a part of the international Greek culture (that’s why Tabitha was more commonly known as Dorcas). Joppa, like all other port cities, was anything but pure orthodox Jewish. Instead it was multilingual and multicultural, populated with people from all parts of the known world. But most of all, there was the person Peter stayed with – Simon. We don’t know very much about Simon ... we can probably assume he was a faithful disciple and to some extent a hospitable person because he offered Peter a place to stay, namely with him. And it seems that Peter stayed not just overnight, but “for some time” as we are told.

So what’s the big deal? Well, the big deal is that little detail we do know from the text about Simon. Luke has said little, but done much with that little detail. Simon is a tanner. Yes, you might say, but ...? Well, recall that tanners make leather. They make leather from the skins of dead animals. Dead pigs, even. And as a consequence tanners were the “unclean of the unclean.” No Jew in his right mind would have entered into Simon’s house, let alone have stayed there “for some time.”

We have no record that Peter used the opportunity of staying at Simon’s house to preach. But by staying there Peter did much, even while saying little. His action spoke way louder than words. By being seen to not only associate with Simon but to stay with him in his house, Peter sent out huge signals to those who would reject faithful people like Simon, signals that those who others considered not worthy of being Christians were in fact not only welcome but legitimate members of the new church.

In many significant ways, not much has changed in the past two thousand years. The healing power of Jesus is still active within the faith. There are still saints like Dorcas who with their selfless gifts of time, talent, and charity sustain and uplift widows and orphans and the hungry and the poor. There are still those like Peter who having learned the power of Jesus to heal now minister in his name. But sadly there are also still those who need to hear the message that the Simons are welcome and a legitimate part of the church. Even this week I have been having an ongoing email conversation with a

woman who is so quick, so eager to exclude those she considers as unclean as Simon from the grace of God. We don't have to look very far to find many other examples of people ready to identify contemporary "Simon the tanners" and to exclude them on the basis of language, culture, background, breeding, social status, or any of a hundred other invalid reasons.

Peter was able, through saying little but doing much by associating with Simon the tanner, to signal that the grace of God is for – maybe even especially for – the Simons of the world. We might note that in doing so Peter also signaled that he was ready for his big revelation about the gospel being for the gentiles too, but that's next week's text. For now, it is important that we note that we have the opportunity to send out a signal of God's love just as Peter did. There's no indication that Peter tried to convince Simon not to be a tanner, or to change any of his other ways. Peter, in a move significant enough to get remembered and cast in scripture, stayed with Simon the tanner. It's not likely we'll be called upon to go upstairs and bring a Dorcas back to life – it could happen, but it's probably not likely. But, we do have the chance every single day to send a huge message to the Simons of today's world that they are welcome, and to send the same message to the world that we embrace today's 'Simon the tanner' in the same love with which God embraced us in Christ.