

“Exposed By Your Actions” – Acts 9:36-43 – Easter 4 – Apr 25, 2010

We’re taking a break from the gospel readings today, and instead we’ll focus on the scripture reading from the book called The Acts of the Apostles. This book of the New Testament offers a fascinating glimpse into the developments in the new and growing faith, although it cannot be considered simplistically as a linear history of those events, at least not a history in the way that we think of a history today. To get you started thinking about this reading I have a “pop quiz” kind of question, and that question is, “did you catch the throw-away line in this text?” 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.

In last week’s reading from Acts we heard about the start of Paul’s ministry – his conversion on the road to Damascus, 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 about who was responsible for starting the church in a number of places in scripture. There are 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 Paul 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 or “official” 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 few minutes ago. 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 if you are a fan of the TV show CSI you might 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. We might think this is a copy of the incident with Jairus’ daughter, but this is no mere replay of what had happened before, 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 that has begun 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. Simon is a tanner. Now you might say, “yes, 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’s faith was exposed by his actions. His actions spoke way louder than words. By not only being seen 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. 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, sexual orientation, or any of a hundred other invalid reasons.

Peter's faith was exposed by his actions, and by associating with Simon the tanner signaled to the church 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 just as the surprising breadth and depth of Peter's faith was exposed by his actions, so too our faith is also exposed by our actions. In preparation for next week's Emmaus Project gathering I've been reading a book by one of the presenters, Don Posterski, titled "Enemies with Smiling Faces." In his book Posterski describes the many ways that people are vulnerable to the pressures of the cultures in which we live, and it takes conscious effort to live our lives in ways that are consistent with what we profess to believe as Christians. For example, we may profess that we, like God and Christ, want justice for all and yet fully participate in a system of consumerism that blatantly oppresses weaker people in other parts of the world. Or closer to home, we may claim to be a loving Christian, but through adherence to a society creed of efficiency and effectiveness offend and drive people away by being officious and bossy. It takes deliberate self-recognition to understand how our actions often expose a different us than who we believe we are.

Peter was exposed by his actions with Simon to be a person of much deeper, broader, and more accepting faith than he is often credited for being. Tabitha – or Dorcas, if you prefer – was exposed by her actions to be truly a loving, caring, compassionate person of Christian faith, and beloved of many. We, like Tabitha and Peter, also have the opportunity to send out a signal of God's love through our actions. 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. But our faith is also exposed by our actions, and 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. May God grant us the wisdom to know how others see us, and the grace to be who Christ calls us to be.