

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, Sunday May 16, 2004
Jeremiah 31: 15-17
Acts of the Apostles 9:36-43

Tabitha. The woman Tabitha, the woman named a disciple. Tabitha created church in a place where it was dangerous to have church. Tabitha cared about the people who everyone else would have just liked to forget about. Tabitha opens up her arms and most likely her kitchen and her home to the widows. She does so against all odds, in a male dominated world she was a leader. In a state religion dominated world she was called to offer an alternative. In a crises dominated world that didn't have time for widows, she made time for the widows.

She opens herself up, and in they come, crowding around her, trying on garments she made for them, clothing they probably never thought they would be able to have. I imagine them as beautiful robes and shawls and flowing pants made of silk and beads and perhaps some glitter, so striking and colorful and soft to the touch. I can see myself amidst her fabric and picking out the one piece that is just for me, that she made thinking of me. What did Tabitha make for you? Tabitha, the place where the church is real and relevant, where needs are taken care of, where individuals and communities are challenged, where concern is with those who need it most.

If only the church could be a bit more like Tabitha, and weave together the remnants that no one wants, with some sequins here that clash with the fine fabric there that matches the feathers adorned with stones. Which ones are you? The sequins, the remnants, the feathers, the stones, the silk? Separated a part they are pretty boring but woven together, what a gift Tabitha has to give to those who need it most.

One night, on the water's edge, water perhaps not so different from the water that came close to Tabitha's, I think I experienced church not unlike church that Tabitha created. The night was so dark and without clouds so the stars glimmered off the lake like sequins in front of us as we sat clustered together, holding each other, freezing our rear ends off, telling ghost stories and cracking jokes. Just sitting with each other, perfectly content, knowing that we had come home. All of us, together we sat, at peace, God's love flowing between each other.

No, I wasn't with my first girlfriend, or even an early attempt at a boyfriend, I fell in love with the church before I fell in love with women. I was at a conference in high school. We were selected as the "young" scholars to attend a theology conference together, to talk about the church universal and how we may be a part of forming its future.

We talked, talked, talked all day long about the church, much of the conversation I understood and much of it I thought was just stupid because I was baffled with what it had to do with the real life of pressure of SAT's and world poverty and discrimination, and why my friend had recently been

killed in a drive-by shooting, and my own questions about my sexuality. So, we talked and talked and talked all day long, they split us up to be one young person per small group, just to spread out our wisdom. Church didn't happen though, at this church conference, until that evening under the stars of glistening beads. Huddled together, cold and silly and in love with Jesus we prayed together and held each other and felt God's love flowing through each other. Baptists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, black, white and in between, from both coasts and in the middle, young, all of us, passionate, all of us, searching, all of us, together we came with a profound love and respect for each other.

I go back to that lake every few years, just to remember that time together, I walk around that lake, I pray at that lake, I write there, it is at that lake that I gain perspective on life again. If only that lake were a little closer to New York. But when I need to be there at least it is so real to me that I can remember what it feels like.

It is that place of hope that I need to return these days. I need to return there, to remember what it is like to have church, to have a group of unsuspecting people come together, so different from one another, but so bonded to each other through God. I need to return there because it is so rare these days that I find church. I observe national trends and have to stomach that our denominational offices again facing incredible funding cuts, of course affecting women and people of color before any one else. I face the figures that in 10 years 40% of Presbyterian Church USA clergy will be retired when not nearly as many new people are entering into the ministry. I also face the reality that too many women drop out of the ministry within the first five years because of the pay disparity, the power disparity, the opportunity disparity. And that for women of color, they leave faster than us white women, because of our supremacy and our denomination's racism. In 20 years who will be left? Is it worth it to stick around?

I also need to return to that lake because I am confronted with the simultaneous joy and excitement of hopefully being ordained this summer and the confusion of why I care so much about staying in a denomination that is dying and doesn't have a relevant Word to speak to the majority of the world. Why stay when I have so few colleagues and when this road at times feels so lonely. I am confused with why I care so much about entering in a new way a denomination and that has repeatedly said "no" to me because I am queer, a "no" which has been told to faithful follower after follower, not just because they were queer but because they expressed their love for God in a way that wasn't decently and in order enough. As much as I fight to just accept that "no" and move on with my life God's "yes" keeps winning the race. And I am still here.

So, I return to the water's edge in the last stages of this process towards ordination. I return thankful for Rachel, who we heard about in the Hebrew Scripture reading, Rachel who cried for her children, for the children who are no longer in this church. For the children who have jumped ship long

ago. I am thankful for the promise that Rachel will be reunited with her children. And I am thankful for Tabitha and her widows who ministered and fought for the church to be relevant place, a place not interested in placating, entertaining, reverently rearranging minutiae but a place that asks hard questions, that challenges society, that welcomes in those who need it most.

But Tabitha, she dies, her body washed and laid out, ready for burial. Her widows around her weeping and wailing, grieving, what would become of them now? Where would they go? What would they do? Who would love them and who would feed them and clothe them?

We enter the text this morning with Tabitha dead, laid out upstairs having been cleaned and awaiting burial. Perhaps I think the church is like Tabitha, dead, maybe not very clean, but waiting for burial, or awaiting a miracle.

Tabitha, dead, is not the end of the story though. It is the beginning of the story, it is where we enter the story.

Help is sought, it is sent for, go and get Peter for maybe he can do something! And he came back, and he quieted the place and he prayed.

Last January I was in Houston Texas for a retreat with the other national evangelists I work with. We were staying with the Community of the Servant Savior Presbyterian Church, which butts up right against the big Baptist church in town. Community of the Servant Savior was a dying church when Susan, the pastor, first arrived. She told us that she read every book possible on how to revive a church, what mission projects to do, how to empower leadership, what worship should look like. She came and read and read and read all by herself and she did everything those books said. And none of it worked. After trying all the tricks in the bag she told us that she was reduced to prayer. In desperation she asked her congregation to join her every day four times a day and pray. In all her reading Susan hadn't been praying for her dying church. So, over their dead body of a church they prayed as Peter prayed over Tabitha. Over their dead body of a church they asked the Holy Spirit to come and greet them and tell them who they were to be, to discern whether or not they had any pulse left. They did this just as the disciples had to ask for some outside help seeking Peter for the Holy Spirit to work through, discerning how Tabitha could live on.

So every day they prayed: "God, tell us what we are to do" and then they listened. During the prayer time they stopped all their charity work and their social service work, for two years, and they prayed every day "God, tell us what we are to do." And then they listened. Just like Peter who cleared the room of the chatter and the weeping and the chaos they cleared their responsibilities to their food pantry and their Mom's Day Out program and they sat together seeking the Spirit.

Susan talks about how before she and her congregation prayed together she didn't know how to pray and they taught each other how. After two years of this Susan told us that she had a vision. Now Presbyterians are uncomfortable with visions, with God speaking directly to us. So many people have said to Susan, "you didn't have a vision, you had a good idea!" But no, Susan had a vision. And God told her to plant a garden. A garden? Susan didn't know how to keep plants alive, yet alone plant an entire garden! God told Susan that what they were to become was a place of hospitality. And that would begin with a garden. So they planted a garden that butts up against the Baptist Church.

And after the garden was created they asked who needed to eat from the garden. They asked who needed that food, the same kind of food Tabitha gave to the widows. So they became a More Light Church.

And then they asked what they had to do to welcome in those people so that they could eat from the garden. So they made their whole church, all of the grounds of the church, into a place of hospitality and welcome. With tea kettles and private places to pray, with a compost heap and a kitchen stocked with food, with comfy couches and places to walk outside, they created their space anew. They ripped out the pews, they worship in a circle, not unlike this circle here, they celebrate Communion every week, and then they decided that they needed to create a retreat center. So they are constructing retreat rooms named after the women saints in the church. Perhaps Tabitha will have a room named after her. And when we go back we will stay in these rooms.

And now they gather every Wednesday night to pray together, for those who are not there and are searching for a place that is relevant and welcoming and vibrant, they ask hard questions together, "God tell us who we are to be." In the dry, dry land of Texas not so far away from the sea they sit by the water and take in the waves and the fresh air, all of God's remnants and Her scraps of silk and felt and cotton and Her ribbons and buttons and sequins, they come together to make beautiful garments.

Peter turned to Tabitha's body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.