

## **“Community of Disciples” – Acts 9:36-44 – May 12, 2019**

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In an article written for a past issue of Christian Century magazine, a Presbyterian pastor from Missouri named Heidi Peterson shared the following story. “Southwest of Guatemala City, a road leads to the barrio of La Esperanza. The poorly graded dirt road challenges even four-wheel-drive vehicles. At the edges, the street just falls off -- eroded away in gullies cut by rain and sewage. Tiny houses built wall-to-wall are made of scrap lumber, sheet metal, cardboard, cinderblocks. Women, children and an occasional man linger in doorways to catch the elusive breeze. Bone-thin dogs roam, sometimes dragging emaciated puppies clamped onto their withered nipples.

“When the Guatemalan government unleashed its wave of terror against the indigenous, largely illiterate farm worker population, 25,000 men, women and children were killed in five years’ time. Thousands of men were abducted from their homes and disappeared. In the early 1980s, the widows of the ‘disappeared’ left the farms and went to the city for refuge and work. Some formed the community of La Esperanza, which means ‘hope.’

“The widows came together in their desire to survive and to see their children grow up. They worshiped and worked together. They refused charity, but accepted funds from a Presbyterian program that helped them construct one durable building in the center of the community. The building houses a day-care center, a preschool, a health clinic and a weaving cooperative. The women care for each other’s children. Some have been trained as dental hygienists and nurse practitioners. Some sew clothing for others or sell weaving in the market. Compared to begging and gleaning, it is a dignified life.”

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article//clothed-compassion>

This story illustrates how a group of women in a deplorable and desperate situation, banded together. Because of their support for one another, they rose above the poverty and circumstances that threatened to keep them helpless and hopeless. Despite their lowly status in their society, their spirits could not be destroyed. By living in community with one another, they were stronger and better equipped to beat the odds against them. And in this community, they were able to find “la esperanza” – hope. And where their lives once seemed held only by a tenuous thread, new life blossomed among them.

In our lesson from the book of Acts we come across a similar community of women. Just like the women of La Esperanza, this is a community of widows. Throughout the Bible, widows are considered to be a group of people living on the margins of society. In a patristic society, girls fall under the protection and control of their fathers, and women under the protection

and control of their husbands. A woman who has neither father nor husband nor even brother to care for her suddenly found herself in a very precarious place in society. With no means of support, she was often reduced to begging for her survival. If she had children, so much the worse.

In Old Testament times the Israelites were often chastised by God's prophets for their neglect of the widows. Because their place was so tenuous, God had a special concern for the plight of widows and the neglect of their needs was against God's law. In the Gospels Jesus shows compassion for the widows as well as all groups of people who live on the margins of society. And this empathy toward the marginalized was also an expectation of Christ's church. In the sixth chapter of Acts, when it became known that certain widows in Jerusalem were being neglected, the twelve apostles told the disciples to choose from among them 7 men to see to the task of caring for the needs of these widows. Some see this as an early example of the office of deacon.

As you may know, the Book of Acts tells the stories of the early Christian Church. The Book is also known as the Acts of the Apostles. The word apostle means the "one who is sent." After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples, and sent them out into the world, to baptize and share the good news of the gospel. Here in Chapter nine, Luke, who wrote both the gospel and Acts, tells this story about a group of widows in the town of Joppa and a woman named Tabitha.

The lesson tells us that Tabitha was a disciple who was devoted to performing good works and acts of charity. Evidently her specific service was in showing compassion and doing acts of service for the widows of the community. Apparently, she saw a need and decided to do something about it. We can infer from the text that she was a seamstress and used her skills to provide clothing to the widows. Whether she herself was a woman of means or if she simply joined with these widows and encouraged them to care for one another in solidarity, we do not know. But whatever she did do, her ministry among the widows was substantial and she was seen as an exemplary witness in the community of faith. Because of her high status, when she took ill and died, the Christians in Joppa sent a couple men to the town of Lydda, where Peter was staying, to ask him to come.

While in Lydda, Peter had come across a Gentile man by the name of Ananias. Ananias was paralyzed and had been bedridden for eight years. Peter had compassion for him and proclaimed him healed in the name of Jesus Christ. Suddenly the paralyzed man could walk. Word of this miraculous healing spread, and the people in and around the community believed in Jesus Christ because of this act that Peter had done in Christ's name. They

believed because of what he did. The disciples in Joppa heard of this also, and when Tabitha died, they sent for Peter.

When Peter arrived, the people took him to the room where they had laid Tabitha's body. In the midst of their grief, the widows showed him the clothing that Tabitha had made for them. She had been a spiritual leader in that community, and her loss was deeply felt. Peter asked everyone else to leave the room, and then he knelt down beside her and prayed. Then he turned to her body, and said, "Tabitha, get up." And miraculously she did. He called to the saints and the widows and they saw her to be alive. Again, word of this action spread, and many believed in Christ.

Peter's deeds, his acts of compassion, toward the paralytic and to Tabitha showed that he acted of behalf of his lord Jesus Christ. Tabitha's acts of mercy and charity toward the widows of Joppa were a witness to her being a follower of Christ. The widows in Guatemala who banded together to worship together and care for one another show their true alliance to Christ. It is easy to talk about being followers of Jesus Christ, but it is in our actions that we discover the true witness of where our loyalties lie. Jesus came into the world to bring new life to all who would follow him. The stories in the Book of Acts demonstrate the mission of the church - to spread that new life throughout the world, in both word and deed.

We as the church of Jesus Christ have a calling to fulfill. To reach out into our community, discover what needs people have, and to build partnerships so that those needs might be met. As the church of Jesus Christ and as the sheep of his flock, it is our calling to show his compassion and mercy to those in our community and world. Like Jesus told the religious leaders in Jerusalem, they will know that we are his disciples by the acts that we do in his name.