



RAISING THE POOR TO SIT ON THRONES

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 9:31–43
17th Message
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April 3, 2016

Introduction: Peace in the Midst of Persecution

Last week we celebrated Easter and discovered how it took a personal encounter with the risen Christ for his disciples to be convinced that Jesus was alive and still in business. The book of Acts continues the story, as the Spirit of the risen Christ is poured out upon on his disciples and the life of the age to come is unleashed in every direction. After the Spirit was poured on Pentecost the church grew exponentially in Jerusalem. But it wasn't long before hostilities broke out and escalated until the church suffered its first martyr in the death of Stephen.

After Stephen's death Saul carried out a systematic reign of terror in Jerusalem that forced Jesus' disciples to flee Jerusalem into the outlining regions of Judea and across the border into Samaria. Others hoping to escape his reach fled further to Damascus. Saul's inability to contain the followers of Jesus to Jerusalem fueled his rage and "he hatched a plot for their liquidation and persuaded the high priest to sanction it."¹ Armed with the necessary legal documents he headed off on a Roman road for 150 miles towards Damascus. But as he approached the city he was blinded by a blazing light and arrested by the Lord. After three days of fasting and prayer he gave his life over to the risen Christ. Upon receiving his sight, he immediately began confessing Christ in Damascus and Jerusalem's synagogues which such forceful persuasion that he became a target to eliminate. The leaders of the church wisely intervened and sent Saul home to Tarsus to work out his new faith among his own family and community.

Before leaving Saul in Tarsus and turning our attention back to Peter, Luke closes this chapter with critical summary, to remind us how the church was able to flourish in the midst of this period of painful persecution.

So the church throughout all of Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking (i.e. progressing) in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (Acts 9:31 ESV)

The persecution that followed Stephen's death forced scores of believers to flee Jerusalem and in so doing spread the gospel far beyond Jerusalem to Galilee and Samaria. In this context we discover that "church" is not a building or locale but a community of believers united by faith in Jesus. Some attribute the peace they enjoyed to the conversion of the church's archenemy and persecutor, Saul. Saul's conversion certainly brought great relief to those in the church, but the political climate was anything but peaceful. N. T. Wright notes that during the ten years of Pontius Pilate's procuratorship (AD 26–36) there were at least seven incidents when Pilate's actions incited Jews toward revolt.² Tensions and uprisings continued to escalate when Roman emperors attempted to transform the Temple and synagogues into shrines of the imperial cult. The peace that Luke describes is the result of the stability and comfort that the Holy Spirit gives to the community even when it has been uprooted and dispersed. As Darrell Bock notes,

This strength is rooted in the support of the Spirit and the attitude that fears the Lord. They fear the Lord, which increases their ability to cope with the circumstances.³

Therefore even in the midst of political chaos, persecution and dislocation the church is able to thrive and multiply.

Each night when Emily and I sit down to dinner we watch World News Tonight. I used to enjoy it, but the more I've watched it the more frustrated I become as it seems that the world news is dominated by the same themes: terrorism, partisan politics, the economy and perhaps, if we're lucky, the weather. But at the end of the week there is a special segment entitled "The Person of the Week," which offers inspiring stories about ordinary people, who do extraordinary things in difficult contexts. In our text today Luke similarly shifts our focus from politics, persecution and lightning bolts from heaven to the simple world of ordinary people, those unsung heroes who live their lives in faith and hope and offer to God whatever skills they have to serve others within their sphere. These are the people who make up the heart of the church and, as Luke will demonstrate, are the ones through whom the Spirit uses to multiply the church.

I. Peter at Lydda: The Healing of Aeneas

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived in Lydda. There he found a certain man named Aeneas, bedridden (lit. "lying on his cot") for eight years, who was paralyzed. And Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ is heals you; rise and make your bed." And immediately he rose. (vv. 32–34)

Previously when persecution had broken out, the apostles deemed it prudent to remain in Jerusalem. But now, Peter ventures out from the city to engage in an itinerant ministry preaching the gospel and building up believers along the western coastal plain. He follows in the footsteps of Philip, watering the gospel seeds that he had planted, for Jesus had taught his disciples about the interdependence of God's kingdom, that "One sows and another reaps...so that the sower and reaper may rejoice together" (John 4:36–37; 1 Cor 3:6). In the midst of his travels Luke documents two of Peter's miracles, one in Lydda and the second in Joppa on the coast. Darrell Bock notes that,

Lydda is on the road from Jerusalem to Joppa, about a day's journey by foot from Joppa and twenty-five miles northwest of Jerusalem. It was the center of a toparchy, one of ten administrative districts in Judea. It was predominantly a Jewish town of mixed population⁴

The initial believers in Lydda were probably the result of Philip's preaching when he passed there on his way from Gaza to Caesarea. During the persecution that followed Stephen's death, their ranks swelled with a large number of refugees, who had fled Jerusalem for safety. Given their immature faith and increasing population, the believers would have received Peter's stabilizing and authoritative presence as a welcome gift to strengthen and encourage them.

I wonder what instructions he would have given them. Luke doesn't tell us; instead he draws our attention to "a certain man named Aeneas." Names are often significant in the Scriptures. While the name "Aeneas" ("praised") may not strike a chord in our ears, in Luke's world Aeneas resonated with all the heroic pride of Rome—the George Washington of Roman history. Aeneas was made famous in Homer's epic poems in the 8th century BCE. He was the son of the prince Anchises and the goddess Aphrodite and became the mythical hero of Troy and Rome. His reputation continues to expand in Roman mythology. But as William Anderson writes,

It was Virgil who, during the 1st century BCE, gave the various strands of legend related to Aeneas the form they have possessed ever since. The family of Julius Caesar, and Virgil's patron Augustus, claimed descent from Aeneas. Incorporating these different traditions, Virgil created his masterpiece, the Aeneid, the Latin epic poem whose hero symbolized not only the course and aim of Roman history but also the career and policy of Augustus himself. In the journeying of Aeneas from Troy westward to Sicily, Carthage, and finally to the mouth of the Tiber in Italy, Virgil portrayed the qualities of persistence, self-denial, and obedience to the gods that, to the poet, built Rome.⁵

While the mythical legends of Aeneas evoke Rome's triumphal pride and "praise," in Lydda Aeneas has no glory to emulate. He lies bedridden in the dust, paralyzed and utterly helpless, having been bound to his mat for eight years. When Peter finds him, he discerns that the Spirit has already been at work and announces to him the good news, "Jesus Christ is healing you; rise and make your bed." Peter's command to Aeneas to "rise" is the same word used of God raising Jesus. The Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is now at work in Lydda. The cure is instantaneous and complete—"And immediately he rose." The second command translated "make your bed," is literally "spread _____ for yourself," but there is no object to the verb. The force of the command seems to be "take care of yourself," you are no longer dependent. Trusting Peter's words, Aeneas is lifted out of his perennial paralysis and given a new life of freedom, independence and responsibility.

And all those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord. (v. 35)

Aeneas is so taken by the gift of a new life, that he "spreads" his praise far and wide, first in Lydda and then throughout whole district of Sharon, the plain along the coast from Joppa to Caesarea. The significance of the Aeneas' healing was not lost on those living along the coast. One look at healed Aeneas would communicate their opportunity: that just as Aeneas was freed from his paralysis, they too could be freed from sin's bondage, set free to walk in newness of life. This was the reality to which the miracle pointed, and it was available to all who asked. Aeneas' "praise" for his risen Lord far outshined the tainted glory of his mythical counterpart in Virgil's Aeneid; wherever Aeneas went, people turned to the Lord in droves.

Luke subversion is brilliant! In a mere four verses he upends the mythical glory of Rome with the eternal glory of the risen Christ. The heroes of this world are tin cymbals compared to the eternal glory of the resurrected Christ who raises the poor from the dust to sit with princes.

II. Peter at Joppa: The Raising of Tabitha

A. Tabitha "the beloved"

Now there was in Joppa a certain woman disciple named Tabitha, which, translated, means Dorcas. She was full of good works and acts of charity. In those days she became ill and died, and when they had washed her, they laid her in an upper room. (vv. 36-37)

The second miracle Luke details takes place in Joppa (the modern Jaffa), the ancient seaport for Jerusalem, about twelve miles from Lydda. In Joppa there is also a group of believers, one of whom was particularly treasured by the congregation because of her character—"She was full of good works and acts of charity." "The detail suggests that she is wealthy and generous"⁶ to the point that she has reoriented her entire life to serving the poor. Thus she raises the bar for what it means to be a disciple (mathētria – "female disciple," the only use in NT) and follower of Jesus. Her name Tabitha ("Dorcas" in Greek) is Aramaic for "gazelle," the metaphor for the "beloved" in Song of Songs (2:9; 8:14), and for Jonathan, David's beloved friend, who sacrificed his life for David to be king (2 Sam 1:19, 25-26). Tabitha's character is everything her name suggests, and so we can imagine how her illness and subsequent death would devastate the congregation.

After her death they washed her body in preparation for the burial and "laid her in an upper room." Such an intimate act is foreign to our culture where dealing with the dead is a sterile process done by professionals. In many other parts of the world preparing the body for burial is done by those closest to the deceased and is viewed as an intimate, therapeutic act of respect and closure for the loved ones.

When our first two children died in infancy, the hospital offered to take care of their bodies. At the time it seemed a gracious gesture to minimize our pain. I did not know what I had missed until sixteen years later I found myself ministering to couple whose six-year old son had suffered a heart attack. In the final hours of his life, we gathered round his bed and sang "It is well with my soul." In the refrain of the second verse it seemed as if a veil was lifted and heaven came into the room. I left the room and when I returned, their son had died. For the next half an hour I watched in holy silence as his mother held her son on her lap and caressed his body. Then she laid him on his bed and the nurse washed his body with such tenderness and care as if it were her own son. Going home I wrote these lines,

O Holy night, angels sang,
The grip of night grew limp,
he appeared
and each soul felt its worth.

After the disciples washed Tabitha's body, they laid her in an upper room, which seems odd, as burials normally took place before sunset. As Bock points out, "This action may well express the faith and hope that she be raised from the dead... In the Old Testament, bodies in an upper room were often noted in resuscitation accounts (1 Kgs 17:19; 2 Kgs 4:10, 21). Luke's Gospel has two such accounts (Luke 7:11-17; 8:49-56)."⁷

B. The widows' plea

Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, hearing that Peter was there, sent two men to him, urging him, "Please come to us without delay" So Peter rose and went with them. And when he arrived, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping and showing tunics and other garments that Dorcas made while she was with them. (vv. 38-39)

When the disciples hear that Peter is ministering in Lydda, they send two emissaries to urge him to come to Joppa in the hopes that he might raise Tabitha from the dead, just as Jesus had raised Jairus' daughter. Upon hearing the news, Peter does not hesitate—he “rose and went with them.” After a day's journey, they arrive in Joppa and lead Peter up the stairs into the upper room. When the door is opened Peter is engulfed in a sea of sorrow. The room is packed with weeping widows. As William Willimon notes, it is difficult to comprehend the magnitude of their grief. “Widows were on the bottom rung of society, with no one to represent or protect them. These are the ones to whom Tabitha, the Gazelle, has given life. She dies and her life-giving work dies with her.”⁸ Through their tears each widow proudly “shows” (the verb is in the middle voice suggesting they are wearing them) Tabitha's handiwork, from their colorful outer garments (*himatia*—“outer garment, apparel”), to the finest detail of their undergarments (*chitōnas*—“tunic, shirt,” a garment worn next to the skin).

It is a fashion show more inspiring than any runway in New York or Paris and more costly than any collection of Calvin Klein or Giorgio Armani. To clothe the naked in life and death is a holy act. It was God's first act of redemption in the garden, a gesture of undeserved grace that removed the guilt and shame of our first parents. It was an act of solidarity and acceptance, granting them freedom to leave their hiding place and come out into the open. It was a sacrificial act, for these garments were not cheap, or mass produced. Each one was purchased with innocent blood. All of this makes Tabitha's garments priceless. The lament of these weeping windows clothed in Tabitha's tapestries of love brings heaven to earth. As Tom Wright observes,

As we saw in chapter 6, widows were beginning to form an important group within the life of the church. There is something poignant about this group, who by definition were all carrying one of life's largest forms of grief, becoming recognized and acknowledged as having, not merely a claim on the general resources, but a significant contribution to make. Do not belittle the ministry of stitching, sewing, knitting and generally providing for the needs of the larger community—especially at a time before anyone dreamed of mass-produced clothes. And do not forget to celebrate, as Luke does here, the fact that the apparently ordinary people are not ordinary to God.⁹

For the last two years our church has partnered with International Justice Mission's office in Mumbai, India. A small church in the city made up of “Dalits,” the lowest caste people who were once referred to as “untouchables,” heard about the work of IJM and wanted to help. A group of women began sewing in August to make 700 quilts in time for Christmas for victims of sex trafficking. They heard that the girls rescued from brothels also needed clothes. The next time they received a batch of donations for their own needs, the congregation decided to give everything away. They washed the clothes and packaged them and prayed over each bag for IJM to give to sex trafficking survivors.¹⁰

C. A funeral is transformed into a wedding

But Peter put them all outside, and knelt down and prayed; and turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, arise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. And he gave her his hand and raised her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he presented her alive. (vv. 40–41)

With just a few brush strokes Luke paints the climatic scene with masterful artistry. The first places our focus on Peter with three lines

of action. In the first he is putting all the weeping widows outside. Once the room is sealed in silence, we see him dropping to his knees and praying to the Father. Finally when his faith is fully assured, he turns to the body and we hear his voice, a mere two words, “Tabitha arise.” In Aramaic (“Tabitha koum”) they are almost identical to Jesus' words (“Talitha koum” Mark 5:41) when he raised Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:41).

Peter's words shift our focus to Tabitha. Hearing his voice, she opens her eyes and when she recognizes Peter she sits up. Like a father coming into a bridal chamber, Peter extends his hand to Tabitha, she takes it and he raises her up, opens the door and calls saints and widows, who rush to the bottom of the stairs. With tears of joy he escorts Joppa's “Beloved” down the stairs and presents her alive into the arms of her extended family. The Spirit of Jesus has transformed a funeral into a wedding.

D. A new beachhead

And it became known throughout all Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. And he stayed in Joppa for many days with one Simon, a tanner. (vv. 42–43)

Tabitha's restoration to life had a similar impact as Aeneas' healing, such that “many believed in the Lord.” But the way Luke describes this new growth in the church suggests that Tabitha, unlike Aeneas, was not the one spreading the good news, rather the news had a life of its own. Given Tabitha's character, there is no doubt what she was doing. She quietly went back to her life-giving work—knitting, sewing and sharing her wealth—for there were still many widows and poor to be cared for in Joppa.

Luke tells us that this seaport remained fertile ground for the apostle to nourish many new believers for considerable time. Before Luke closes the curtain on this scene, he makes sure one more saint is listed in the Joppa credits, Peter's old namesake, “a certain Simon, a tanner,” who generously provided the hospitality and base of operations for Peter during his stay in Joppa. The final word strikes a dissonant note. As a tanner, Simon worked with dead animal skins, an unclean occupation, even “despised,” by scrupulous Jews. As Bock suggests, “That Peter would house himself in such an unclean place shows that some in the church's leadership are not overly sensitive about all aspects of Jewish purity laws.”¹¹

Wouldn't you have liked to eavesdrop on their dinner conversation, as they looked out over the harbor at the end of the day—Simon the former fisherman dialoguing with Simon the tanner? I wonder who had the greater impact on the other—the fisherman deepening the faith of the tanner, or the tanner untangling (or freeing) the fisherman from his old nets.

III. Life Unleashed Through Ordinary People

I am encouraged by the message of this text. I can get discouraged when I compare myself with the phenomenal people accomplishing remarkable things for Jesus, like the head of IJM creating new justice systems all over the world—from the courts to the police, rescuing more victims of slavery than all other organizations combined. I read Michael George's prayer letters from India where he is constantly spreading the gospel into new villages to Jesus every week, healing, teaching and discipling people. I used to read the great preachers like Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, George Whitfield, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones and think, “If I could preach like that we'd have revival.” Finally I heard Eugene Peterson once say that we don't need great preachers, just good preachers who are faithful. But still when

I compare what I've done with my privileged life compared with others who accomplished so much with so little, I often wonder, "What am I doing?" This text set me free. Reflecting on it, notice not only who God uses to multiply the church, but also the means by which they do it.

A. Good news: You don't have to be in the limelight!

1. Who: A certain man named Aeneas – paralyzed
Result: All those dwelling in Lydda & Sharon...turn to the Lord.
Means: They saw him
2. Who: A certain woman disciple named Tabitha– dead
Result: Many believe in the Lord
Means: The report became known throughout Joppa
3. Who: A certain Simon, a tanner – unclean
Result: Is Peter experiencing greater freedom being in the Simon's home?
Means: Hospitality

B. Good news: You don't need to be gifted in speech!

The Scripture doesn't say that Aeneas went and preached the gospel; Luke says that he showed up and when they "saw him" raised from the dust, they turned to the Lord. Aeneas just shows up—that's the whole testimony. Tabitha doesn't leave the widows to begin preaching. She went back to her life-changing work of knitting and sewing and caring for widows. When God does a miraculous thing to save a life, we mistakenly think, I'm here for a purpose and have to do something grand. The truth is, he saved you, because you are you. And he will do his work in the ordinary things of how he has already gifted you. Simon—what does he do? He remains at home feeding his new friend meals, making his bed, and dialoguing over supper. He never leaves Joppa, but in the next chapter Peter's speech (10:28, 34) hints that being in Simon's home may have helped free him from his old nets to go to Cornelius' house and start the first Gentile church. We are free. Just be you—keep doing what God has called you to do.

B. Male and female co-heirs with the risen Christ

In Luke's typical style, he pairs the story of a man with that of a woman to demonstrate in Christ there are no sexual distinctions (Acts 2:17; Gal 3:28). "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17).

And in this case it is the juxtaposition of both male and female with Jesus "raised up." We are not only all one in Christ, but we are elevated as co-heirs. Reflecting on this text, a friend of mine said, "We are still hung up on the male and female thing. If only we could press into our complete selves as disciples, we might see more heaven on earth!"

When the kingdom comes it subverts the old order, raising the poor to sit on thrones (1 Sam 2:8). As Willimon further explains,

Every community, every family, every congregation exists within certain settle, fixed arranged of power and weakness, life and death. People are told that there is a divinely established chain of being, a fixed order in which we are to find our place and stay there. Tabitha is to stay home and let the men devise an

affordable welfare system. Peter is to stay with his fishing nets and leave theology to the scholars, and Aeneas should obey doctor's orders and stay in bed. But the word comes to these people in the presence of these who, like Peter, come out among them and stand beside them. There miraculous events are subversive of the present order, for they announce a new age, an age where reality is not based upon rigid logic or cause-effect circumstances but upon God's promise...Every time a couple of little stories like these are faithfully told by the church, the social system of paralysis and death is rendered null and void. The church comes out and speaks the evangelical and prophetic "Rise!" and nothing is quite the same.¹²

Tabitha's tapestry
praise woven mystery
upper room mourning
turned into bridal bliss

linen covered innocence
risen
from death's chambers
welcomed by
healing from
nail pierced hands

skin draped
in the dancing
of dawn's morning drops
held
in a flowing dress
in rose petal white
completely blameless
in Your embrace

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