

Fourth Sunday of Easter
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, April 24, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30

Grace to you, and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come.

So the other day I got into a rather interesting discussion that turned out to be part religion, part politics. The conversation began with me being asked what I thought was the basis, the most common element, that a society needed in which all the people could unite – that which everyone could get behind – that they all could support regardless of their ethnic heritage, regardless of their religious beliefs or their physical abilities. And so as I sat there coffee in hand, eating an oatmeal raisin cookie, thinking to myself “this is not at all what I thought I was getting myself into,” I thought for a few moments and then probably responded with a more theological response than what was expected. I said that most major religions have some sort of code, or commandment, or law, or axiom. Within our Judeo-Christian belief we’ve got those commandments, don’t we? But even those, when pressed, Jesus himself trimmed them down to just two. In Mark’s gospel he tells us to ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Mark12:30, 31) In John’s gospel it’s recorded even shorter than that: “This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John15:12)

To delve even further with the theological realm, I would have to say that basically God wants us to get along with each other. And the hope is that as we care and look out for one another that we will in so doing be a witness of God’s love to those with whom we are helping. And those who do not know God would hopefully see God at work in what we’re doing as we help those in need. As we make certain that everyone has enough to eat, that everyone has a safe place to sleep, and clean drinking water. And know, then, that we’re doing those things because God loves us, and them as well.

Now, I do know that very rarely do things actually work that way. But I do think that’s how God wants us to live. And as an example, we have from our first reading tonight the story from the book of Acts (The whole title, by the way, the book is really called The Acts of the Apostles. Go home, read all 28 chapters. Put down your Clive Barker, turn off “24” and read the whole book. It’s really fun, it’s very exciting. Read a recent translation of it).

So, the story of this early Christian community in the Middle East is happening there in the coastal town of Joppa. It’s a relatively international place for being on the far eastern shore of the Mediterranean. There’s apparently a lot of commerce happening there in Joppa. There are not only a lot of Jews, but a fair amount of Gentiles as well; specifically Greeks. So many, in fact, that folks who deal with the public often have two names; they’ve got their Hebrew name and they’ve got a Greek name. So that is what is going on with our main female lead tonight. She’s got these two names. She’s apparently a merchant because she makes a lot of

clothing. And so, she's known to the Jewish community as Tabitha, but to the Greek folks she's known as Dorcas. (Both of these mean gazelle, which is a beautiful and graceful deer-like animal that lives in North Africa in the Middle East. But I have to tell you that I can't call her Dorcas; I have to call her Tabitha, because that name kind of gets me all the time).

She is part of the believing community, and she's very well loved. As it said in verse 36, she was "devoted to good works and acts of sharing." But then she falls ill. She dies and her death sends the community into grief because she was devoted to good works and acts of charity. However, the community also knows that just the next town over in Lyda, that's where Peter is. So they send for him and he comes.

Now, it's at this point in our story that we get some parallels with that gospel story when Jesus raised the little girl, the daughter of a man named Jairus. Because, like Jesus, Peter enters the room where the deceased is laying. Like Jesus, Peter sends out all those who are mourning. Although in the gospel story the mourners are paid mourners, whereas here in our story in Acts the people who are grieving Tabitha's death are doing so because they love her and care for her, and truly miss her. Like Jesus, Peter takes her hand and tells her to get up which, surprisingly, she does. She's alive! This is amazing! Everyone is therefore rejoicing because they loved Tabitha. She's loved not only by the community of believers, but apparently by the secular community as well.

Can you imagine what a radically different place our world might be if we really all began living like that community of Joppa? What would our world look like if we truly cared for those around us regardless of their ethnic heritage or native language or immigration status or financial background or geographic location? Here was a woman living out her faith, helping those around her, and within the town of Joppa.

So where is your Joppa? Tabitha lived and worked in this multi-ethnic setting and that's where she put her faith into action. It was there in Joppa where she didn't simply talk about how much she loved God, but she showed people how much she loved God by loving them and by doing something for them.

Maybe you already know where your Joppa is; where that place is that you personally and regularly treat every human being as an equal. Maybe it's your office. Maybe it's at the grocery store. Maybe it's at school. Regardless, though, of where your Joppa is, what matters is how we respond to those around us. Not only in times of stress, in times of need, but in our everyday time of things.

Maybe your Joppa is right here at Trinity. Maybe this is where you put your faith into action. Or maybe this is where you want to get more involved. Get involved with the educational ministry. Be a Sunday School teacher, or an Affirmation of Baptism mentor, or shepherd new members. Maybe you have an inkling to get involved with the Evangelism Committee, or the Fellowship Team. Or maybe your passion is with the Missions and you want to help us as we support David Kuch in

Jamaica, and Our Saviour's Lutheran Church on Rocky Boy Indian Reservation in Montana. Or the Camden Lutheran Parish of Camden, New Jersey, Epiphany Lutheran Church of Valdez, Alaska, AnnE Zimmerman of on Eagles Wings in the Northwest Territories.

Or there's Parish Ministry. That's where we have the at-home ministry coordinator in cahoots with Women of Trinity. They visit folks at home. We have Trinity Cares or the Blood Bank coordinator, Every Member Prayer ministry. Not only do we pray for folks every week, but they are called at home. I'm sure you've received a call asking if there were any prayer concerns that you have. There's the Social Ministry Committee. There's the Stewardship Committee. There's the Worship or the Finance Committees.

All of us are called to put our faith into action just like Tabitha did. All of us are called to love every Christian, every person around us despite their ethnic heritage, or cultural upbringing, or their language barriers, or their skin tone, or hair color. All of us, like Tabitha, are called because of our baptism, to put aside our political or even our religious differences and reach out to those around us, those who are in need. To reach out to those around us and give of ourselves, to give of our time, to give of our love, so that we, like Tabitha, can live out and put our faith into action.

Amen.