

Imitation
Psalm 23 Acts 9:36-43

We have an incredible richness of scripture to work with today. It starts with the 23rd Psalm, which is worthy of a full sermon series all on its own and then the lectionary adds in the Epistle reading the story of Tabitha, also known as Dorcas.

Are you familiar with the English phrase “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery”? It’s an old saying that describes how people have a tendency to become more like those we like or respect.

An early version is found in a biography of Marcus Aurelius by Jeremy Collier and André Dacier, titled *Emperor Marcus Antoninus his conversation with himself*, written in 1708:

“You should consider that Imitation is the most acceptable part of Worship, and that the gods had much rather Mankind should Resemble, than Flatter them.”

Of course, we don’t use the term “gods”, but you get the idea. Our Creator God would much rather for us to seek to resemble rather than to flatter. It’s by that resembling that we are seen as serious, not by flowery words or grandiose gestures.

As many of you know, I served as a law enforcement chaplain for many, many years. I found it a privilege to serve those men and women who served the community. Sometimes it was easy, sometimes very hard, but I felt like it made a difference.

One thing I learned quickly about the police...they and my parents had a great deal in common! My father used to say, “if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.” Makes sense, right?

The officers I worked with would say, “if it dresses like a gang member and acts like a gang member, it’s a gang member.”

Now this was a shock to a number of wanna-be hoodlums who wanted to dress tough or act “street smart” but didn’t want to be treated “like criminals” by the police. And it came as a shock to a number of parents, as well. “Officer” you can’t treat my son as a gang member, he’s a nice boy”

“Ma’am, your son is wearing gang colors, flashing gang signs, carrying a gang weapon and hanging out with gang members...”

(if it LOOKS like a duck and quacks...)

You see we ARE, or at least we are BECOMING what we imitate.

Let me give you another example:

Great artists aren’t just born, they are made. They practice, toil, paint and sculpt over and over until they produce something worthwhile.

Harper’s Weekly published an article in the late 1800’s about Americans flocking to the famous Louvre museum in Paris to copy the work of the masters found there. The article claimed that “the true artist, the real one, copies the picture of some great master, and follows it out not only with his eyes and hands, but with his heart and soul.”

So, with that in mind, let’s turn to today’s Epistle reading. You just heard the words:

“Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.

³⁷ At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs.

³⁸ Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.”

³⁹ So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

⁴⁰ Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up.

⁴¹ He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive.”

If imitation is the most sincere form of flattery, then what better way to give praise and glory to God than by imitating Jesus?

Tabitha, also called Dorcas is introduced to us in this story with two surprises right from the beginning: First, she’s dead.

She is dead before we even have a chance to meet her, to find out anything about her. And second, she's called a "disciple". That was the same term, the exact same term used to describe male followers. And why not? She is a follower of Jesus, not just in name, but in the goodness of her life that has become her reputation, known to all through her good works. She has been an imitator of Jesus throughout her life.

It's significant that she is surrounded by widows who are mourning her death. These widows may have been recipients of Tabitha's goodness, as they show off garments that she made for them, the physical remnants of a life filled with caring for others.

So, when the believers in Joppa hear that Peter is close by, they send for him, believing that one who was so close to Jesus will know exactly what to do.

But...and this is a BIG question...do they expect Peter will raise her from the dead? Does Peter expect it himself?

I imagine Peter doesn't know WHAT to expect, but he knew, even as WE know, that we can turn to God for help and trust God to determine the rest.

When Peter walks into that situation, he does the only thing he knows how to do; imitate Jesus. The whole story has an uncanny replication of a story he once witnessed while looking over Jesus' shoulder when a young girl died and was raised to life.

Peter is surrounded by messengers and by weeping bystanders. He imitates Jesus so closely when he asks mourners to leave the room, command Tabitha to arise in the same language Jesus once used and takes her by the hand.

I can't help but wonder, is he as surprised as everyone else when it works?

You and I may not ever witness a resurrection, but it's clear that Jesus wants us to imitate Him, to do what He did, on a daily basis.

Ephesians instructs us to "imitators of God, as beloved children and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Tabitha was a disciple, a follower of Jesus, because she imitated Him in love and service to others. Peter spent so much time with Jesus that he couldn't

help but imitate what he'd seen Jesus do - even the point of raising someone from the dead.

Our lives should be an imitation - NOT cheap ones - but imitations that show the glory of the original as we work on copying the Master.

We are called, no, more than that, we are **commanded** to become more like our Lord and Savior.

Why?

Because it is who we are. It is who we are to become. It is that which makes us followers of Christ. Living into the compassion, the love, the passion of and towards God's creation.

If I have **one** message for you today it is a simple one: Imitate Christ. To the best of your ability, at work, at school, at home...imitate Christ.

So that you will become more like Him in every way.

Amen