



Of Mothers, Sheep, and Pelicans



A Sermon By
Ms. Jean Cotting

March 12, 2019
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2019-05-12-JC.mp3>.*

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February 17, 2019

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

In our first reading from Acts we hear the story of Tabitha being brought back by Peter after being presumed to be dead. Clearly the grieving crowd that surrounds her gives us some indication of what a tremendous loss her death meant to this community. There are a few things we can infer from this text. We read that “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity,” and that “All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that she had made while she was with them.” Apparently Tabitha must have been a woman of some material wealth because what is implied is that she had the wealth and free time to make extra clothing and that she did so to give it away to the poor widows. That is why there is a crowd of widows weeping when Peter shows up. We do not know if Tabitha was a widow. Although given that there is no husband mentioned she might have been. If she was a widow, she was a glaring exception to the rule in that she had independent wealth. Remember in this place and time, a widow is a non-entity in most cases. The luckiest widows were the ones who had a son. Under the law a son would have an obligation to take care of her. If not a son, then hopefully she would have kind hearted brother or nephew or other family member who step up and take her in. In most cases, a widow was at the mercy of others and dependent on their charity.

These weeping women then have not just lost a woman who was a friend to them, but they have lost a woman who cared for them. She was one of the lucky ones; whether widowed or not, she had wealth and independence, but she didn't lose sight of those who were less fortunate than she was. Again, the text is silent on this but I like to think of her as someone who must have possessed a very grateful heart and from that gratitude there arose a sense of charity that drove her to want to lift others up. Then as now, clothing often defines a person. To provide a person with a garment provides them with protection from the elements. It gives them status. It can define and dictate where a person can go. To give someone the opportunity to trade worn and tattered rags for a garment that is bright and shiny, new, clean and whole is to confer on that person dignity and self-respect.

This morning on Mother's Day I am reminded of all the Tabithas that I have known. I think of my own mother who tragically died at the young age of 49. She was a Tabitha. She was an incredibly intellectually gifted woman and probably one of the smartest people I've ever known. But in spite of her intellect she never talked down to anyone. She saw her abilities as a gift and they were a gift meant to be shared for the benefit of others. Her work was teaching children with learning disabilities. She was a woman who lived her life in state of profound gratitude. When I read of Tabitha's passing, I am reminded of my mother's wake that went on for two days before her funeral. It wasn't weeping widows showing off the garments she provided. It was a parade of young men and women who had been her students who had gone on to succeed in school and life because of the help and encouragement that she provided to them. What people remembered about her was not so much how brilliant she was, but her kindness, warmth, and generosity of spirit. I am sure that many of you have come across a Tabitha or two in your lives, and I can also testify that we have Tabithas right here at Grace Episcopal Church. I know this because some of them are on my Lay Support Team.

Today in addition to being Mother's Day is also Good Shepherd Sunday, because of the gospel reading and psalm appointed for today. One of the many names we have come to call the God who walks among is the Good Shepherd because of the guidance and care that he gave and continues to give to us, and I love the fact that these two days line up this year. Now, some of you may have heard that this passage is not very flattering to us as his flock. Sheep are rather stupid. This is true, but there are a couple of things that I did not know about sheep. First is that they have exceptionally good hearing, and two, because they are creatures who flock, they form deep attachments to those whom they recognize. So when Jesus speaks of those who belong to him as knowing him, it's not some anthropomorphic exaggeration. Sheep, dimwitted as they may be, really do

recognize the voice of their shepherd and follow it. I think this must be a characteristic that we humans share with sheep. We know and recognize the voices of those who care for us and are drawn to it.

So on this day we as a flock recognize our mothers. We also recognize all those, whether they are female or male, who mother us and care for us. Like the women at Tabitha's bedside, we remember those mothers and caregivers who are no longer with us. We, as flock, mourn alongside mothers and children who have been separated from each other, and mourn for those experiencing estrangement. We also mourn for those mothers who have lost children and those whose longing to experience motherhood has as yet been unfulfilled. Most of all we pray that all of us will be filled with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we can be there for one another, to shepherd, to protect, to care, to teach, to nurture, and encourage each other. To care for the children in our midst, and to care for the inner child that we encounter even in the eldest among us.

There is another metaphor that the ancient church used to describe Christ. It was that of the mother pelican, and you sometimes still see this image in churches in stained glassed windows. It is said that in times of famine when no food was to be found, the mother pelican would tear open her breast and give up her life so that her young might feed upon her flesh, so that they would survive and live. We need not literally tear ourselves open, but with Christ as icon may we never shy from giving of ourselves so that others may grow, flourish, and thrive by having feasted on the richness of the giftedness that we bring to one another. Amen.