

*Based on Acts 9:36-41. The Raising of Tabitha.*

My mother, whom I celebrate on this Mother's Day 2022, is the most brilliant seamstress I know. Many of the stoles I wear in worship are her creations, including this one I am wearing today.

When I became a church professional in my early twenties, my mother made two new suits for me to wear. One is deep, dark, pinkish-red, with a skirt hemline just below the knees. My mother calls it my *power suit*.

My mother knows that clothes are powerful. That the energy of the pink suit is electric and daring and active, and would inspire the same kind of energy in me: to speak my truth boldly and proudly. She literally sewed the strength and courage and *encouragement* of her own powerful motherly love into the very fabric of my physical identity, as she labored over the garment. She also knew the vibrant colors and eye-catching style would draw appropriate visible attention from my colleagues, as I was trying to make my mark in the early days of my ministry.

This was, at the time, what my mother meant by *power*. It was personal, and it was political. And it worked.

But my very wise mother knows that power is not always bold, proud, vibrant, or courageous. There is a *yin* of power to complement the *yang*. So my mother made another suit for me to wear. That one is velvety beige, with a long skirt and a beautiful quilted jacket. That suit is called *soft power*.

My mother knows that the softer, rounder, more comforting color and texture of the beige suit are a powerful complement to the stark energy of the pink one. That the energy of that second suit is reflective and meditative, and would inspire me to adopt a similar attitude. That my colleagues would be drawn to the quilted jacket as an invitation for meaningful conversation about family and craftsmanship—or craftswomanship, in this case. That this kind of soft power, a shared relationship of reflective power, would also help me make a meaningful contribution in the early days of my ministry.

All of which leads me to believe it is not just a throw-away line in our Lesson today from the Book of Acts when the widows of Joppa tell the apostle Peter that their beloved Tabitha, who has become ill and died, has clothed *them* with the power of the very tunics they are wearing, in this moment of resurrection hope.

Tabitha, it turns out, has been quite the Shepherdess when it comes to the Community of Jesus in Joppa. A woman of means, Tabitha must be, as someone who can afford a house with *an upper room*. Named as a disciple, Tabitha is in this text, using the feminine form of the Greek for that term. Which indicates Tabitha very likely either traveled with Jesus as a leader during his ministry or provided for his travels out of her own abundant resources or both. And now, upon his death and resurrection, Tabitha continues as a respected leader of the movement, perhaps even the first century equivalent of Pastor, First Church, Joppa.

Tabitha, who we are told is devoted to good works and acts of charity, Tabitha surely knows that clothes are powerful. From softly powerful to boldly powerful and every kind of powerful in between. Tabitha, like my

mother, like so many mothers, like our mothering, shepherding God, wants to *empower* the people who wear her clothes. In this case, the widows of her community, whom we know from the biblical prophets are among the most vulnerable members of society.

Make no mistake. Tabitha could have gone another way. A wealthy woman, likely well-educated, in a flourishing port city along the Mediterranean, Tabitha could have cultivated her own power exclusively to her own advantage, colluding with the powers of Rome to expand exponentially her own power and privilege as a first century feminist success story. Instead, Tabitha embraces wholeheartedly The Way of Jesus in the world: good news to the poor, release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed. And she is rewarded for it.

But Tabitha is tired, by the time we meet her in the Book of Acts. Tabith is weary. Burned out. Ready to call it quits. It is too hard, you can hear her murmuring, as she goes through the motions of her ministry. I have nothing left to give.

*She became ill*, the Scripture says, *and died*. And hope dies with her. Or so it would seem.

Which is where many of us find ourselves today, two plus years into COVID and a democracy in peril and a climate in crisis and our young people in mental health purgatory and religious liberty around reproductive health threatened and a nuclear accident just waiting for a place to happen as Russia continues to bombard Ukraine.

We are tired, we confess, we are weary and burned out, ready to call it quits, with so much at stake and little left to give. And the ones in our midst who are the most vulnerable are weeping, weeping, weeping, with no end in sight.

But they refuse to give up! Everywhere around us, the most vulnerable among us refuse to give up! Yes, this is round 10,000, the widows of Joppa admit, in the boxing match of life, but there are 10,000 rounds to go. And we are still here, and you are still here, and the God who raised Jesus from the dead is still here, and the glass may seem half empty instead of half full, in fact the glass may seem completely empty and not even a drop full, but at least we still have a glass, and that is something, the most vulnerable among us insist.

So the widows reach out to Peter, the Rock, who has been pretty shaken himself, as we recall, who knows what it is to run away in fear himself, as we recall, who knows what it is to fail miserably when the stakes are high, as we recall, but the widows reach out anyway, because at this point, what do they have to lose?

And Peter comes, with his big bold powerful Rocky self, but by now he has been humbled. By now he has learned the meditative, reflective energy of soft power. By now he has learned how to kneel and to pray. By now he has learned how to hold out a hand in compassionate care, by now he has learned the exact right thing to say in order to encourage a sister disciple who is down in the dumps that it really is okay to get back up again.

And she does!

Which is what we also do for one another in *this* congregation of resurrection hope on this Good Shepherd/Mother's Day Sunday 2022, in our tired, weary, burned out, ready to call it quits, with so much at stake and little left to give.

Because if there is anything we learn from our Lesson today it is that when all hope seems lost, it is time for a miracle. And if there is anything we learn from our Lesson today, it is that the miracle lies in the community itself. The miracle is in the community that refuses to give up hope, even when it seems all hope is lost. The miracle is the reaching out for help in community. The kneeling down and praying in community. The shared reflective meditative energy of soft power in community. The holding out a hand and helping one another up in community.

If there is anything we learn from our Lesson today, it that the resurrecting Spirit of our Shepherding God, who leads us beyond our wants and fears and into Abundant Life, is found right here in this miracle of our community at Shepherdstown (or shall I say Shepherdess town) Presbyterian Church.

May we give thanks to God for the miracle of this community.

Let the church say, Amen!