

Tabitha, a mother to her community

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC on May 11th, 2025 – Acts 9:36-43 & John 10:22-30)

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Welcome to Mother's Day. A day in which we celebrate the mothers in our midst and all they do as they care for us. It is a day of celebration for many, but for some it can be very difficult. Some of us have lost or are separated from our mothers or children, some for all kinds of reasons have not been able to become mothers and others have suffered trauma at the hands of their mothers, so let's remember those people as well.

Mother's Day, as we know it, was first envisioned in America in 1870 in response to the carnage of war. The founder despaired that, young men went off to war and were killing each other, and in so doing were forgetting all their mothers had taught them – charity, peace and patience. It was observed to remind people of the importance of peace and reconciliation. It was never envisaged to be the commercial event that it now has become.

It is appropriate then, that as we celebrate all that is good about mothers, that we hear the story of both of Tabitha and Jesus as the Good Shepherd today.

Tabitha (the Greek version of her name is Dorcas), who was Tabitha, what do we know about her? Well, not a lot as it turns out. We don't really know who she was, we do know that she is a disciple of Jesus, a follower of him. We also know she spends her days and her skills helping others in her community. We know her death leaves a number of people, predominately widows grief stricken.

It would appear that she was a woman of wealth, perhaps a wealthy widow? We don't know even if she was a mother – at her death there do not appear to be any children, or a husband or any parents. We know she was a woman of means as she was using her resources to help the most needy in her community, the poorest in her community – the widows. Maybe she even employed some of them in a kind of cottage industry, giving these poor widows a source of income to support their families. Widows in Tabitha's time had no means of support once their husbands had died and may even had children to care for.

It is possible that it was in her place that the local Christian community met to worship and pray, she was known to Peter and the other disciples, hence they being called into help.

It appears that she practiced care for the poor as both Paul and James called the Christian community to do. Paul reminded the Galatians that the believers were asked to do one thing: *'They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.'* (Galatians 1:10) James reminded the Christian Community, that *'Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself unstained by the world.'* (James 1:27). She certainly was caring for the widows, perhaps because she understood exactly how difficult it was to be a widow back then.

So, Tabitha uses her skills (as a seamstress) and her resources to clothe the needy and the poor. And she is much loved by those she made garments for, shown by the weeping and holding up and showing Peter the tunics she had made for them. She has cared for the vulnerable in her community. More than that, the story of Tabitha spread around the known world, and many came to be believers because of that.

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I always wondered what life would have been like at Tabitha's house, it must have been a hive of activity. Cutting and sewing fabric, pouring cups of tea, sharing food and stories, a listening ear, gentle guidance given and love shown all the time. Here as she weaves and sews fabric, she also binds the wounds of others. She was clothing them in both tunics and dignity. A mother to all in the community, whilst not actually being a mother at all. All the traits of the Good Shepherd in our other reading – one who guides, listens, protects and cares deeply. Both Tabitha and Jesus comfort the broken-hearted and protect the vulnerable.

I hope that we have all met a Tabitha in our life – someone who cared, who provided and who guided us when we have needed it most.

As I think about my time at this church there are two Tabitha's that come to mind (and I am sure that others of you who have been here longer can add to the list). Mama 'B' – who would take you into the garden and give you fresh vegetables and then take you into the kitchen and feed you soup and pasta and focaccia and then send you away with more. And when she wasn't preparing food, she was knitting, knitting rugs and beanies and jumpers for others. Mama 'B' made you feel safe and loved as she cared for you – a real Tabitha in our midst.

The other Tabitha we were blessed to have was 'R'. 'R' cared for the vulnerable in the community – like Mama 'B' she would make soup for the needy. She ensured that we provided our open pantry and was generous in her support of that. She used her skills to assist those who needed help with immigration matters, she ensured the church ran smoothly and has done most of the work leading up to the possibility of providing social housing on our site. Always ready to find ways to care for the most vulnerable in our midst, 'R' too was a real Tabitha in our midst.

Mothering or shepherding are about caring and nurturing others, especially the most vulnerable and we are all called to do that. No matter our age or gender we can all do that. Tabitha shows us how we just need to use whatever skills and resources we have and put them to use to care for the needy in our midst. This is the subversive nature of Christianity, the subversive nature of following Jesus, this turns the world upside down and sends a message of hope to all, but especially to those in need.

Our open pantry is a practical way of being 'Tabitha' to the wider community. A potential social housing program is another way to be a 'Tabitha', to offer protection and security to the vulnerable and clothe them in dignity.

Tabitha's story reminds us that we do not have to overcomplicate matters, she shows us that we only need to use our gifts to serve others. We don't need fancy degrees or lots of money or retraining, we just need to offer who we are, to use the unique gift God has given each and every one of us. Tabitha is indeed a disciple who has set us an example to follow, one who shows us how to love and care for others with compassion.

So today on Mother's Day, give thanks for those who have been a 'Tabitha' in your life, give thanks for those who have been a 'good shepherd' to you. And then take the next step and think about how you might be a 'Tabitha' to others. How you might use your skills and resources to clothe those around you in dignity? These small acts of care will turn the world on its head and reveal to the world that we follow the Good Shepherd, the one who guides and protects, the one who feeds and provides rest.

Happy Mother's Day.