

“The Song must Go On”

A sermon based on Acts 9:36-43
 Delivered on Sunday, May 12th, 2019
 at the Frist Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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Out in the world, in every day, work-a-day life, you don't hear them at all anymore. Works songs have passed from practice and into collections of folk songs by someone like Pete Seeger, or one of the collections of the Smithsonian Folk Ways. You no doubt know more than a few.

*John Henry was about three days old,
 sittin' on his papa's knee.
 He picked up a hammer and a little piece of steel;
 said, "Hammer's gonna be the death of me, Lord, Lord.
 Hammer's gonna be the death of me."*

Another that was very common is this.

*Well, Old Dan Tucker, was a fine old man,
 Washed his face in a frying pan
 Combed his hair with a wagon wheel
 Died with a toothache in his heel*

*Get out of the way! Old Dan Tucker,
 You're too late to get your supper.
 Get out of the way! Old Dan Tucker,
 You're too late to get your supper.*

Another song that became one of the freedom songs of the civil rights movement runs like this:

*Paul and Silas, bound in jail
 Had no money for to go their bail*

*Keep your eyes on the prize,
 Hold on, hold on,
 Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!*

*The very moment we thought we was lost,
 Dungeon shook and the chains fell off,*

Keep your eyes on the prize,

*Hold on, hold on,
Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on!*

That began as a work song for the fields. Or one more that was heard on many a ship:

*Our boots and clothes are all in pawn
Go down, you blood red roses, Go down.
And its flamin' drafty 'round Cape Horn,
Go down, you blood red roses, Go down.*

*Chorus: Oh, you pinks and posies,
Go down, you blood red roses, Go down.*

It was a song sung as sails were raised. Each time you heard the word “Go,” that was your cue to pull on the halyard.

Work songs were excellent means for synchronizing a large number of people by way of the rhythm of the song. It pulled the workers together for common work, and it bonded them together in their common lot. Far from being mere individuals, suffering under a heavy load, the work songs reminded them they were all in it together.

All of the workers would know the choruses, which remained the same throughout the song. They would be lead by someone not unlike a jester who could be counted on to sing the usual verses, but who would also improvise to the delight of the workers. A good work song, led by a creative song leader could make the hours pass by in such a way that at the end of the day, you still would feel like a human being.

I believe that Tabitha might have been one of those kinds of song leaders. And the workers she led consisted of widows. When we look around at the churches today, they have recognizable orders. Most churches have deacons, some have elders, all have ministers or pastors or priests, some have bishops. These all have their roots in the early church.

Another order that existed then, but which does not now, was the order of widows. This passage in Acts presents one of the earliest examples of the kind of

order they were, and of their importance in the church. From the very early third century we know that one of the callings of widows was prayer.ⁱ

A great theologian of the early church, Origen, listed widows along with bishops, elders and deacons.ⁱⁱ And Tertullian of North Africa calls them an order and adds that they were assigned places of honor within an assembled congregation.ⁱⁱⁱ

And how right that would be, what a powerful witness to a world in which widows existed on the very bottom of society. Without male support of some sort, they often were poor, isolated and disrespected, in the world. But in the church, they were cared for, they were incorporated into an order within the community of faithful, and they were given the same respect any disciple could expect.

They went about the work of prayer. They were often at the front of charitable work. And Acts would have us know that they also supported themselves through weaving and making clothes.

I wonder what kind of work songs they sang as they worked. Might they have sung a Psalm like number 68:

The upright rejoice in the presence of God, delighted and crying out for joy. ⁴ Sing to God, play music to his name, build a road for the Rider of the Clouds, rejoice in [the LORD], dance before him. ⁵ Father of orphans, defender of widows, such is God in his holy dwelling. ⁶ God gives the lonely a home to live in, leads prisoners out into prosperity,

Or might they have sung something they would have heard sung in their worship services, something like this: (Luke 1:46-49)

"My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord ⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; ⁴⁸ because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed, ⁴⁹ for the Almighty has done great things for me.

A gathering of widows, singing the Magnificat as they worked. Yes, that sounds about right. For just like Mary, that was who they were, in the Church. God sees the humiliation of the lowly. God has an eye on those others do not notice.

Jesus shows us this vividly in Mark and Luke. Those Gospels tell us that Jesus sat in the Temple one day, and watched the procession of those putting their money into one of the treasury boxes. And who does he notice? Who does he say has put in more than anyone else? A widow, who dropped in two small coins.

God has an eye on those others do not notice. And God does indeed do great things, even for the least of these.

II

Acts does not tell us that Tabitha was a widow. Instead, it tells us that she was a disciple, and that description of her as a disciple is the only one in all of the New Testament that uses the feminine form of the word. Acts suggests she was a singular example of faithful service. “She never tired of doing good and giving to those in need.” (vs. 36)

Sadly, she became ill and died, leaving her guild of widows bereft in their grief. Somehow, the faithful hear that Peter is nearby in Lydda, and they send word that he should come to them without delay.

Acts does not tell us that they wanted him to raise her. I doubt they would have even imagined asking for that. Most likely they wanted only Peter to witness what they had lost, and to offer his pastoral care to the widows in their grief.

So, hearing the summons from the two visitors, Peter left with them immediately. Right away, when he arrives, the widows take him to the room where they have laid her, and they begin to show him the kinds of things she had made, and, no doubt, they told stories about her compassion and her service.

At some point during all of this, Peter became overwhelmed with the sense that something had to be done, something out of the ordinary. After clearing the room of everyone but himself and Tabitha’s body, he knelt down and prayed. The text here is very spare, just the facts. No histrionics. Peter doesn’t stand over Tabitha and raise his arms, Charlton Heston style, to work her rising.

He simply kneels down and prays. And because Christ hears and answers his prayer, he then speaks only two words: her name, “Tabitha,” and the

command to rise. And she does. She opens her eyes, looks at Peter and gets up. After all, there was still good to be done and people with needs.

III

I do not know why, of all of the leaders who died, Tabitha was the one who was raised to continue her work. What we do know is that the Book of Acts shows us barrier after barrier being crossed as Christ's kingdom becomes ever more inclusive. That the leader of a guild of widows should be raised should come as no surprise to us who know scripture well.

Following our passage, Acts tells us that a Centurion, named Cornelius, will have a vision. He will send messengers who will find Peter, still in Joppa, who will have just had his own vision on a rooftop. The result will be the crossing of a barrier, in which Gentiles are baptized and welcomed into Christ's Church. That's the kind of book Acts is. It tells the story of how Christ is indeed for everyone, and for the whole world.

Who knows why Tabitha was raised? Maybe she was given more time to prepare the leaders who would follow her. And maybe that example of hers would set the pattern for all who would follow her in the faith.

Like that little band of followers in Joppa, this little band of followers here in Urbana has been and is blessed with remarkable leaders. But unlike the faithful in Joppa, we cannot send down the road, to Rantoul perhaps, and call for one of the Apostles to come to our aid. No, since those early days, the task of raising up leaders has been given to us.

But Peter does show us the way. When the need arises, we kneel down and we pray. We then call the name of the one whose time has come, and we say "It's time to rise up." "Your brothers and sisters need you. Rise."

God never leaves us bereft. For God knows our needs and always provides. That means that we will never be short of leadership. There will always be those among us who know the work songs, and who can even learn to lead others in singing those songs. The only thing they require is the calling of their name, along with the summons to rise up.

May God grant us the strength to persevere in prayer. And may God grant those who have ears the courage to answer when the Spirit calls their names.

Amen.

ⁱ *Apostolic Constitutions*, chap. 11.

ⁱⁱ Origen, *Hom. in Luc.* 17.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tertullian, *On Modesty*, 13.4.