

You Belong

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Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now 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. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since 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." ³⁹So 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. ⁴⁰Peter 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. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

John 10:22-30

22At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, 23and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. 24So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." 25Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; 26but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. 27My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. 28I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. 29What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. 30The Father and I are one."

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What makes you feel like you belong?

You don't have to share this one today but I do want you to close your eyes and envision someone who has helped you feel a sense of belonging.

Maybe it is a mentor or a loved one or a close friend. Maybe even someone in this congregation has helped you feel like you belong. When I close my eyes and think

about the person who has made me feel like I belong, I immediately think of my mom.

And if it is a mom or another motherly figure in your life, make sure you tell her thanks on this Mother's Day.

But what I am really curious about is not just who has helped you belong, but how you know that you belong?

For me feeling like I belong means that there is a lot of acceptance. I am able to be in a place or with people and generally be honest about how I feel whether it is joyful or sad. It is generally a feeling a being able to be your true self.

Belonging also means that I am welcomed and included, there is a place for me at the table and my opinions and stories are valued. And also that there is a sense of connection. It is being with people or in a community that shares common values.

Dare I say even you coming here with your common value of belonging to Christ and following Jesus.

Is there anything I am missing here?

Belonging is found in our gospel lesson when Jesus confronts the Jewish leaders about those who believe him and the sheep who hear his voice and follow him. Those who listen and follow Jesus are the ones who belong to Jesus.

But today I want to focus on the story in Acts, the one about Tabitha being raised from the dead by Peter.

Within the Gospels and now within Acts, I always feel like there is tension around miracles and what is miraculous. As I discussed a few weeks ago with the resurrection.

I think on a first read through of the Acts text, the thing we might draw out is the miracle of Tabitha being raised from the dead by Peter. It is miraculous, but Peter had his time last week and this week we are talking about Tabitha, not Peter.

And Tabitha herself, is miraculous outside of being raised from the dead.

She is miraculous simply because she is named. It is rare in the whole Bible that we get women who are named. And Tabitha even gets two names, Tabitha and Dorcas, but I am going to refer to her mostly as Tabitha.

And so we learn some miraculous and amazing things about her: first and foremost she belongs to Jesus because she is a follower of Jesus' way. We know this because she

is called a disciple (essentially the ONLY woman who is called that!!!) and she has devoted herself to good works and acts of charity. Remember in the gospel Jesus says, I testify to the father through my works, well that is Tabitha too. She testifies to Jesus through her good works and charity. She doesn't just talk the talk, she walks the walk.

She was a witness to the good news of Jesus because of what she does which is: her community building of widows and caretaking of them. We know this because they surround her deathbed and when Peter arrives, they show him the fine clothes and material that she has provided for them.

She truly witnesses to all that Jesus does in the gospels.

And there is one fun thing I heard this week in relationship to the word witness. It is its' connection to the idea of "being with" with-ness. When we are witnessing to Jesus we are also doing with-ness because that's Jesus did. He was with the people who were on the margins helping them to attain a sense of belonging.

And Tabitha did this too. When she dies she is surrounded by a group of widows who show Peter what she has done in helping to provide for them.

Tabitha has crafted cloth, but more importantly she has crafted and birthed a community of women who have found in her and around her a sense of belonging. A safe place where they can share their stories and be together with one another in a loving community!

And I think that is pretty miraculous. Because belonging and attaining a sense of belonging is honestly pretty challenging. It is hard to make room for people and when we feel different or outcast, it is hard to feel like we belong anywhere sometimes.

Often when we think about belonging we have to think about what prohibits belonging. What makes us feel like we don't belong...

As I was reading about Tabitha this week, I read too about widows in the early church. In the letter of 1 Timothy in the epistles of the New Testament (now a reminder, 1 and 2 Timothy are letters said to be written by the Apostle Paul but it's not one of the authentic letters by Paul, meaning that someone else likely wrote it pretending to be Paul)

but in these letters there are a lot of stereotypes about widows and women in general.

I thought maybe we could have a nice chuckle about it so I thought I'd read a bit of it to you: "Honor widows who are really widows... Let a widow be put on the list if she

is not less than sixty years old and has been married only once; she must be well attested for in her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way. But refuse to put younger widows on the list; for when their sensual desires alienate them from Christ, they want to marry, and so they incur condemnation for having violated their first pledge. Besides that, they learn to be idle, gadding about from house to house' and they are not merely idle, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not say...

hmmm. If you are a widow, would you enjoy someone saying that about you?

Yikes, stereotypes of people and judgements about who, especially women, and especially stereotypes that do not allow women to be independent people but people who need to be controlled and set apart, these stereotypes do not create belonging.

And I am sure whether you are a widow or not, you have felt in some group or situation that you just don't belong because of something about yourself.

And when, like in that first letter, we use those stereotypes or judgments against one another, It does not allow us to see the fullness of one another's lives or our fullness of us as people who truly desire to belong.

In our text for today, for the women who find belonging with Tabitha, they are named as widows. They are a part of this marginalized and stereotyped group which, in this letter to Timothy, are held to wildly high standards that most of the disciples weren't probably following.

But the "widows" they become so much more than just this name when they are brought into a community where they experience belonging.

They bear with-ness to Tabitha on her death bed and when she is made alive by Peter.

And they bear witness to Christ Jesus when they, after Tabitha is raised from the dead are the ones who go out and share the good news! The good news of Jesus but also the good news that they are a powerful community knit together by love and belonging not marginalization and stereotypes.

They are essential to sharing the good news and expanding the church.

Tabitha ministers to these widows, she builds a community of them, and she breaks through stereotypes. Women are easily marginalized today and in the Bible, but Tabitha herself is only named as a disciple. She is not known for her profession, her

motherhood, or her marital status. She is known for her good works and her charitable acts that reflect her discipleship.

That reflect her belonging in Christ. And that which allows these widows to find that same sense of belonging in Christ.

And this is a belonging that can never be taken away from us. It is a belonging that unlike anywhere else you all share because you too are disciples of Jesus. So thanks be to God and to Jesus who gives us the rare gift of totally and wholly belonging.