

John's gospel looks back to a time when Jesus was teaching in the Temple, before his death and resurrection. Here Jesus confirms his identity and we are reminded it is this Jesus, the Messiah, the Good Shepherd, that Peter and Tabitha follow and it is Jesus' ministry of love and care that they take up for their own. This is where I want to spend some time this morning, with the account of Peter and Tabitha in the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts is Luke's account of the early church, known in those days as The Way, a time of exponential growth. Peter is, as promised in last week's gospel, a very different figure now. He is, in fact, tending to Jesus' sheep. Having been called, he comes immediately and in Jesus' name restores Tabitha to life. He is clearly exercising his vocation to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and build the Church.

Tabitha is a fascinating to me. She is one of only a few women named in the gospels given this much detail. She is clearly loved. Can't you almost hear the women gathered around her dead body showing Peter all the fine garments she has made for them. She is an important figure in her community. In fact, it seems through her compassion and care of other widows, she has actually created a beloved community. She is their shepherd, and she is a model for us. We can emulate her, and Peter's, embrace of their vocation to serve the mission of the church in Jesus' name.

What is the mission of the church? To build up the Body of Christ through the exercise of our various gifts. Clearly this is happening in the first century. In this account in Acts we hear, "This [the healing of Tabitha] became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord."

But was the church growing just because Peter restored Tabitha to life – or because of the way she chose to live her life in imitation of the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ? I wonder if many more believed because Tabitha, restored to life, was able to continue her ministry of love and care to the marginalized in her community – and bring others into that same way of life. This, I believe, is what attracts people to a church. Living out our faith together is what forms a strong Christian community – the kind of beloved community Tabitha created through her work and witness to Christ.

The Christian vocation is one of love and care of our neighbors – all of our neighbors. The dictionary definition of vocation is "a strong feeling of suitability for a particular career or occupation." But that is what culture says. It is our Christian tradition that links vocation with a life of love and service, which, I think, goes far beyond a career or occupation. It is a life patterned on Jesus' life. It is a selfless life less concerned with a job's salary and benefits for oneself and more concerned with the benefits extended to those being served. It is the kind of life Tabitha lived. And it is almost always countercultural to the way the world would have us live, even though it is certainly possible for one's career to be a vocation, too. In fact, for a Christian, ideally it will be.

It is also much too narrow an understanding of vocation to think of it as needing a collar – making it seem only one of us has a vocation. We all do. Vocation isn’t stagnant, or a onetime only call; it shifts and changes over time, determined always by our community’s greatest need and our greatest joy. Perhaps it was not just Tabitha’s love and care, but also her joy in serving, that infected the widows around her with their own desire to love and serve – their own vocation.

Have you ever met Tabitha? I know I have. When I was younger, I was embraced by the Episcopal Church Women at St. Paul’s in Wickford. They became pseudo mothers to me. We worked together providing funeral collations. I not only learned how to cut tea sandwiches and place desserts artfully on a tray, I also learned what it meant to be loved unconditionally during a particularly difficult period of my life. And I grew in faith and trust because of their love and care.

The Tabithas of the world remind us that the God who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead is still active in the world, bringing healing to the sick, hope to those in despair, and life where death seems to reign.

Those who belonged to The Way, the early church, were empowered to turn the world upside down – and so are we – in the name of Jesus and according to God’s plan for the salvation of the world – the Way of Love. This is how Christians live into their particular vocation. This is the mission of the church.

Again, from Acts: “Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha... She was devoted to good works and acts of charity.”

And here, at Trinity.... I guess we all will need to finish that for ourselves and about ourselves in order to faithfully follow where ever Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, leads.