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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
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Acts 9:36-43, John 10:22-30

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And when [Peter] had come, they took him to the upper room. All the widows stood beside him weeping, and showing tunics and other garments which Dorcas made while she was with them. (Acts 9:39, RSV)

Last Sunday I preached about Saint Peter, including his very important ministry as an old man. When he was old, he served the Master he loved through a pinnacle of obedience: martyrdom. I mentioned in passing in that sermon that I meant someday to preach about the young—about the special opportunities and temptations faced by the young as they try to follow our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Today is the day. Now is the time when I mean especially to speak of the young Christian.

My main text for this sermon is this morning's story of Dorcas, whom Saint Peter raised up back to life. I think of Dorcas as a young woman. I do not know that she is young, for the Bible does not say, but I *think of* her as young for two reasons. First, the raising up of Dorcas is so very similar to the earlier story of Jesus raising up the twelve-year girl. It is a story I love, much as I love this story of Dorcas. Especially I love the end of that story where Jesus commands that they should give the girl something to eat—young ones, you know, always being hungry:

⁴¹And he *took the damsel by the hand*, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. ⁴²And straightway the damsel arose, and walked; for she was of the age of twelve years. And they were astonished with a great astonishment. ⁴³And he charged them straitly that no man should know it; and commanded that something should be given her to eat. (Mark 5:41-43, KJV)

Likewise in this morning's story about Dorcas, we have that graceful gesture of Saint Peter, in imitation of Jesus, when he takes Dorcas by the hand and lifts her up:

⁴¹And he gave her his hand and lifted her up. Then calling the saints and widows he presented her alive. (Acts 9:41, RSV)

It is as if the Holy Spirit, by the parallelism of these stories, wants to teach us that the resurrected Jesus can do wonders on earth through his apostles, just as he did before he was crucified. So, that is my first reason for thinking of Dorcas as young. She seems so akin to the young person raised up by Jesus.

But my main reason for thinking of Dorcas as a young person is that she has a youthful spirit—a spirit that pours itself out in goodness, unmindful of the shortness of life, ungrasping, idealistic. I like the young! I place so much hope in them. So, I want to talk about Dorcas, thinking of her as a young woman.

DORCAS: AN ANSWER TO A PROBLEM

I began preaching about Dorcas earlier this week, in our Wednesday evening liturgy. But as the days slipped by since then it has dawned on me why I am so drawn to this story, and almost desperate to lift up this story: It is because the manner of life of Dorcas is in my mind the *solution* to a problem—a problem that I think many of us are brooding about: the murders and mayhem at the Boston Marathon.

There is a phrase in the New Testament that seems to perfectly fit these chaotic days of ours—these days of the murder of children in their schools, the murder of people in shopping malls and theatres, and now the murder of people up in Boston. The phrase is “the mystery of iniquity.” The phrase comes from Saint Paul, from his Second Letter to the Thessalonians. The apostle is talking about the end of the ages, along with the frightening figure he calls “the wicked One, the lost One, the Enemy” (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4, NJB). In the epistles of St. John, he is called the “antichrist.” He seems to be a charismatic incarnation of Satan, capable of leading many people astray.

But when St. Paul speaks of the “mystery of iniquity,” he is not referring to the arrival of the antichrist, but rather to a spiritual chaos that *precedes* the coming of the antichrist. The passage goes this way:

⁷For the mystery of iniquity doth *already* work: (2 Thessalonians 2:7, KJV)

To use the image of Chrysostom, it is as if the coming of “the wicked One, the lost One, the Enemy” is like a great approaching forest fire, which is so hot that it slays little creatures of the forest before it even arrives.

I feel driven to this Biblical language about the “mystery of iniquity” as the appropriate language to express how stunned, baffled, and troubled many of feel about the violence in our land these days.

I bet you have had the experience of reading a bad book or watching a bad movie, when you say to yourself, “The start of this novel is so bad, I might as well give up on it right here and now, for there is no conceivable ending to this book that can somehow make up for the disasters at the start of it.” That is the sign of an incompetent author, in my mind. When a movie or a book starts off with a scene of child abuse, for example, I simply do not care about how the book ends up. In fact, it is an offense to imagine that there can be a satisfactory conclusion to such a book.

That’s how things feel these days for our land. I am glad that the brothers who caused those murders up in Boston have been restrained, and I am glad for the heroism of the people involved, and for the sense of relief that they all feel now. But that cannot make up for the brutal image of athletes—people who have trained and disciplined their bodies to such high standards—being blown up. In a flash you have this shift from health and happiness to the horrors of wickedness. The start of *this* book has no satisfying conclusion in human terms.

The mystery of iniquity seems afoot in our land, and there are only two solutions to it, as far as I can figure. One is the final outcome of things, when all wickedness and sorrow will be removed from this old earth of ours. This final outcome is contained in the defiant words of Jesus in this morning’s Gospel Lesson:

²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; ²⁸and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand.
(John 10:27, RSV)

No terrorist, no bomb, no ideology, no false god, is going to be able to snatch people out of the hand of Jesus. Nothing reaches that high. The outcome of all humanity belongs to Jesus and nothing can change that.

And the second solution concerns the here and now: It is the manner of life of Dorcas. For I am convinced that in the face of the mystery of iniquity, the best thing we can do, and the absolutely needful thing we can do, is to walk in her spirit as she walked in the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

TABITHA/DORCAS

So, let’s turn to the story of Dorcas. Again, I think of her as a model of the young disciple. She goes by two names in this story: Tabitha, which is Aramaic, and Dorcas, which is Greek. Both names refer to a graceful creature: a gazelle—a

small antelope living in the deserts and grasslands, swift and able to jump high. And there is something about this young woman that suits her name. She seems full of energy and grace. Till she became sick and died, it was as if she was leaping through this world, unencumbered by selfishness or greed. Indeed, she was “full of good works.” What a wonderful summary of a life! That’s what the Bible says about this young woman:

She was full of good works and acts of charity. (Acts 9:36, RSV)

In this letter to the Galatians, Saint Paul urged them to persevere in goodness. He put it this way:

⁹And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. (Galatians 6:9, KJV)

That’s how Dorcas seems. She is young, and she uses her youth in that most excellent way: she employs her strength in well doing. She does not become weary of charity, but is “full” of good works. Was she a great talker? We don’t know. But we do know that she was a great doer.

Can there be a more eloquent salute to someone who has died than the widows holding up tunics and other garments that the young woman had made for them? Those tunics are the most moving orations. They speak volumes about this woman who has died.

Saint Peter raised her back up to life, and I am glad he did, for our world needs people like Dorcas. He prayed, then summoned her back to life. This is what Jesus can do. He is the very Author of life. He who triumphed over death granted grace to his servant Peter to summon the young woman back to life:

[Peter] knelt down and prayed; then turning to the body he said, “Tabitha, rise.” And she opened her eyes, and when she saw Peter she sat up. ⁴¹And he gave her his hand and lifted her up.

Thus a good young woman was restored to our world.

THE BLESSING OF YOUTH

Now, I am glad that she was restored to life, not only for the sake of the widows and other needy people in that town, but also for the sake of us older folks. For it is a ministry that you young people can do, to provide old folks

with a model of gazelle-like discipleship... of discipleship that leaps forward into obedience to Christ, not dragged down so much by the weight of the past.

St. Paul might have been old when he wrote the following words, but in writing them, he was writing as if he were young:

...this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, ¹⁴I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14, KJV)

This is the great grace of being young. You do not have so much past to remember. You are more free to forget “what lies behind.” You can press onwards into the adventure of following Christ today, without feeling beholden to how you were yesterday. For you, freedom to reinvent yourself is more natural than it is for us older folks.

And I would say that you are most truly young when you count yourself flexible and open to new ways of life. Especially you are young when you count yourself free and available to become a saint. That’s what Dorcas seems to have done. There are many ways of living a life. The young are especially free to go for a new way of life and a better way of life. They can do what Saint Paul says: they can forget what lies behind, because not all that much lies behind them anyway. They can face the dawning of each new day with the sense that today they are setting out on an adventure. Today they mean to especially be faithful in following Jesus.

THE MOMENTUM OF BAD HABITS

Because you are young, you do not have decades of bad habits behind you. You are not enslaved to routines. Your ways of life are not settled, they are not set in concrete. You do not have as much reason to be disillusioned with life as older folks are who might have seen so very much that has discouraged them. Fight off such disillusionment. Strive with all your might to remain hopeful and optimistic. That is a good thing about being young. You are not beaten down, and do not permit yourself to become beaten down.

You should not be burdened by boredom, as if you have seen everything this old world has to give, because you have not seen it. You are still young. There is much more for you to see, including many good and beautiful things that the eyes of the elderly have sometimes become too weary to see anymore.

Your youth gives you a reservoir of patience that often exceeds that of the elderly. You ought not to be so angry, so easily put on edge, so easily offended as we older people, with our supposed dignity often are. For you young folks, good humor is natural. It is right that you should laugh. It is right that you

should take delight in things. It is right that you should believe that God has created a good world and that Jesus wants you to enjoy this good world and make it better.

When Jesus comes to you in the morning and says to you what he said to the young fishermen along the Sea of Galilee – Come, follow me – young should be the ones who jump up and come a running.

The elderly need to do that too. Saint Peter did, for example, when he was an old man. People took him and bound him and led him where no one could want to do: to the cross. Yet he went. When he was a young man, the Lord called him to follow, and he did. When he was an old man, the Lord called him to follow, and he did. But jumping up and following is somehow more natural for the young, since they are not so encumbered by the past. And we older folks need that good example. We need it for the sake of our world, and we need it for the sake of our own encouragement, to be reminded by you of swift, gazelle-like obedience to the call of Jesus to “come, follow me.”

STRIVE TO BE YOUNG

My theory is that we should all strive to be young. It’s just that it’s more natural for the young to be so. Let me end by telling you about one more young person: I mean, St. Elizabeth of Hungary.

She was born in Hungary, but raised in Germany. In fact, she grew up in the Wartburg Castle, which is a dear place to us Lutherans because Martin Luther was sheltered and hidden away in that castle and it was there that he began his translation of the Bible.

But Elizabeth lived before Luther, by about almost three centuries. She was born in 1207, the daughter of King Andrew II of Hungary. As part of international politics, she was sent away at age four to be raised in Germany, in hope of forging an alliance via marriage between the two lands.

So, she grew up in the Wartburg Castle along with the one she was to marry, Louis. They seem to have fallen deeply in love and were married young. He was twenty-one and she fourteen. Butler’s *Lives of the Saints* reports that there was some opposition to this marriage:

...their marriage was solemnized, in spite of attempts to persuade him to send her back to Hungary as an unsuitable bride; he declared he would rather cast away a mountain of gold than give her up.¹

¹ *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, Complete Edition, Voume IV, October, November, December. Edited, revised, and supplemented by Herbert Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater (P.J. Kenedy & Sons: New York, 1956)

They had three children, but their life together did not last long. Elizabeth was married at fourteen and widowed at twenty.

Both during her marriage and her widowhood, Elizabeth devoted herself to charity. She was like Dorcas in our Bible story: she was full of charity and good deeds.

Some of you have visited the Wartburg Castle and can picture what I have read:

The castle of the Wartburg was built on a steep rock, which the infirm and weak were not able to climb (the path was called “the knee-smasher”). St. Elizabeth therefore built a hospital at the foot of the rock for their reception, where she often fed them with her own hands, made their beds, and attended them even in the heat of summer when the place seemed insupportable. Helpless children, especially orphans, were provided for at her expense. She was the foundress of another hospital in which twenty-eight persons were constantly relieved, and she fed nine hundred daily at her gate, besides numbers in different parts of the dominions, so that the revenue in her hands was truly the patrimony of the distressed. (Butler’s Lives of the Saints)

After the death of her husband, Elizabeth took the vows of the Third Order of the Franciscans and devoted the remainder of her days to helping the poor.

It is said that a representative of the Hungarian court visited her and found her spinning yarn for the poor. Butler gives this nice little story:

The magnificent fellow started back, crossing himself in alarm: “Whoever has seen a king’s daughter spinning before?” He would have taken her back to the court of Hungary, but Elizabeth would not go. Her children, her poor, the grave of her husband were all in Thuringia, and she would stay there for the rest of her life. It was not for long. She lived with great austerity and worked continually, in her hospice, in the homes of the poor, fishing in the streams to earn a little more money to help sufferers; even when she was sick herself she would try to spin or card wool. She had not been at Marburg two years when her health finally gave way...St. Elizabeth died in the evening of November 17, 1231, being then not yet twenty-four years old.

We are soon off to visit the church in our neighborhood named after St. Elizabeth. After this morning's liturgy, let's head down to the undercroft, grab a bagel, drink some coffee, and then Crucifer Eric Voss will lead us in procession over to St. Elizabeth's, where Fr. Patrick McCahill is awaiting us. That's at 211 East 83rd Street.

We have a connection to that lovely little church: our Lutheran ancestors built it and the rectory next door. Eventually the Lutheran congregation that worshiped on East 83rd Street came and joined the congregation here at East 88th Street. It has a comfortable feel about this, this little church on East 83rd Street. In fact, the pendant lights suspended over the pews seem identical to the lovely pendant lights we used to have over our pews here back before the plaster ceiling fell in 1969. The subject of lights is very much on my mind these days.

So, we are off to St. Elizabeth's. I am interested in the architecture of the church, yes, but even more in the piety of the young woman.

To all people, in all stages of life – to children, young people, middle-aged folks, and to the elderly – Jesus continually calls that we should follow him, following the examples of Peter, of Dorcas, or Elizabeth, and all the saints. And well we should, for he is in charge of all reality and he is deserving of our love, and to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.