

Today is both Good Shepherd Sunday and Mother's Day. Happy Mother's Day to anyone who's had a mother or has been a mother or who has acted as a mother, even briefly, to the next generation. Because Good Shepherd Sunday is about God's care for those in our midst who most need it, the young, the disenfranchised, the marginalized. There are no limits to a mother's love and there are no limits to God's love.

I've heard the book of Acts called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has ascended to heaven and now the disciples are left to figure out what to do next with the Good News they've witnessed. They're driven by the Holy Spirit, who's pushing the disciples to spread the Word of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to ends of earth. The Holy Spirit is driving them to be ever more expansive and inclusive.

Our reading today from Acts, the Tabitha story, comes after the conversion of Saul, which we heard last week - Saul, a man of violent opposition to the new religion, is forced into humility and incapacity by blindness. So now with Saul neutralized, the church in all Judaea, Galilee and Samaria is at peace, gaining numbers, living in fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

In the seaside town of Joppa, a woman named Dorcas has died. Dorcas has two names, Jewish Tabitha and Greek Dorcas which means that, like us, she's part of more than one community. She's Jewish, a faithful disciple, but also friendly with her Greek neighbors. We're beginning to get hints in Acts that differences between Jew and Greek may be disappearing. In a book in which so many women have no name, Tabitha has two. Her two names remind us that she's a bridge between Jew and Greek. But besides that, she's very ordinary. She may be a widow like the other widows who mourn her passing. She's well-liked, productive and generous. And she may be wealthy - not every house in Joppa has an upper

room like the one in which she's laid out. Widows in Acts, have a hard time at the beginning of the book, until the disciples find a way to feed them. So perhaps Dorcas fed her friends as well, adding to her reputation as competent and generous. But there's nothing particularly noteworthy about her.

When she dies the disciples in Joppa ask Peter to come to them, a walk of at least three hours from Lydda. He joins them in a wake like most wakes: her friends tell him about a member of a small community dying, and how much she meant to them.

But now, the extraordinary happens. Like Jesus healing Jairus' daughter in the Gospel of Luke, Peter puts everyone out of the room. Like Jesus, Peter prays. And like Jesus, Peter brings Dorcas back to life. The Master is gone, ascended to heaven. But the healing work of God's Holy Spirit continues in the faith community. The Holy Spirit is at work, healing, raising this dead woman, binding up the community in faith, pushing outward to embrace everyone. Peter presents Dorcas to her friends. Word of the miraculous healing spreads throughout Joppa.

And Peter remains in Joppa at the house of Simon, the tanner. Luke, that consummate writer, never drops anything in casually - there's always a reason for what he tells us. Tanners work with dead animals, which makes Simon unclean. Yet here is Peter, a good Jew, staying with him, in his, no doubt smelly, house. It's foreshadowing, for in the next episode in Acts Peter discovers that no animal and by extension, no human either, is to be called or considered unclean. The Gentiles, that's us, are included in God's saving grace and goodness. Thanks be to God!

Now our leader for the last 15 years, Pastor Hugh Brown, isn't ascending to heaven, he's just making a lateral move, to Virginia. But soon like the disciples, we will continue in faith without a pastor, at least for awhile. And like the disciples long ago, even without our leader, we are called to bring the Good News to the ends of the earth. The Holy Spirit is always calling us to go farther up and

farther in. But first, perhaps we can work on our welcome here at home at All Saints. How do we extend the warmest welcome to the members of our own congregation, both present and future?

We have African, African-American, Latino and Asian members. Now, our service is very Anglo: it's relatively short, well under three hours, and we don't wave hands or call out: Amen, Sister! Preach it! (Although, if you'd like to do so....). Our members seem content with our fairly sedate Episcopal service. But we might think about our images of white Jesus in our sanctuary, of a white Holy Family. We might perhaps offer something more. All Saints' owns a magnificent wooden crucifix, an African Jesus. What if we hung our Black crucifix somewhere front and center, so that it's the first thing a newcomer might see? Or maybe we could find and display Latinx angels? Or an Asian Madonna, in sari or obi sash?

We have seventeen families with school aged kids on the All Saints' list. They came once and now need a reason to come back. Reaching them really would be like evangelizing to the ends of the earth. Sometimes it feels like they're from another planet. And believe me, they feel the same way about us, the still-breathing fossils, the dinosaurs in their midst. Teenagers in particular can number our hypocrisies as God numbers the stars. But we're called to spread the Word to them, too, that they in turn might find love and protection as sheep of the Good Shepherd, to build their faith in Jesus, to give them faith to lean on.

To welcome families we've now moved the nursery from a big comfortable room down in the undercroft, where we could be sure we'd never have to hear them, to a small room *near* the sanctuary for emergencies only. Now *in* the sanctuary we have little tables and chairs. They're for kids, but if you'd like to doodle, or enjoy extra legroom, you can sit there, too. Think of it as seating in first class. Those little desks and chairs tell families that all their members are welcome and belong together in worship of Jesus Christ. Some parents may not have the

words to speak their faith to their kids. They're counting on us to show their kids, by our words and actions, our faith in God's goodness, that those kids might learn from us.

If we had families, a children's message might help, at least occasionally, to feed children and adults alike. We are all God's children, after all, and we all need to hear how much God loves us. If we had families, I'd invite the kids to come down front and I'd ask adults already in the front pews to sit back a pew or two for the kids' message. That way, those adults become Eli to our young Samuels, remembering God's call to Samuel, who, as a young boy, needed his mentor Eli to interpret God's call. And I would say:

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday. Who knows who the Good Shepherd is? [Elliot Van Hoy, seminarian, raised his hand, bless him!] Jesus, yes! At church, if you answer any question with 'Jesus' nine times out of ten you'll be right. This little sheep belonged to my dad, who loved to talk to sheep, and they'd talk back to him. Would you like to hold him while we talk? [This, to Ellie Brown, who was in the front row]

Our psalm this morning, which is our poem prayer to God, tells us: The Lord is my shepherd, he will make sure I have everything I need. He protects me and leads me in the right way to go. Even if things get pretty bad, with friends or school or parents, I have nothing to fear, because he's with me. And his goodness will pursue me, so hard that I can't get away, to bind me up in his love forever! YOU have a personal relationship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd who loves YOU. He will love you now and forever and He will always be your friend.

Today is Mothers' Day. God gives us mothers to take care of us and to love us, just as Jesus does. So go give your mother a flower to thank her, for God loves all mothers, too.

God loves each of us. We're called to share our faith with everyone whom we meet. The Holy Spirit is alive and well at All Saints' Church. Let us share that joy with the whole world, to the ends of the earth. Amen