

**“Tabitha” • Acts 9:36 – 43**  
**Sheth LaRue • July 21, 2019**  
**Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church**

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About a month ago, I went with the middle school students on their mission trip to San Antonio, and it was hard, sweaty, difficult work. Hard because I and my co-leader spent most of our time corralling teenagers who had zero construction experience. Sweaty because, well, Texas in the summer. Difficult because there was only so much that we could do.

I’ve been in homes like the one we worked on in San Antonio: homes owned and lived in by people on the margins of life, people who have been caught by life’s unexpected snares and struggle each day to simply exist. For the brother-and-sister family that we were working with, it was no different. Joe had experienced a serious medical issue which forced his sister to become his full-time caretaker. She left everything to care for him – career, friends, church, home maintenance, and so much more...she left everything because there was no one else who would.

Now, eighteen years later, they spend their days in doctor’s offices, at physical therapy appointments, and daily kidney dialysis treatments. They have no time for careers, no time for relationships, no time for fixing their home. They are on the margins of life – a financial crisis or minor disaster would send them into the streets.

Our church group talked about this situation: the home had become neglected because of a more immediate need; at this point the family was simply trying to live. As untrained and untalented as we were, we could work on the immediate needs and assure that this family could remain safe, warm, and dry in their home. But they needed someone willing to go the distance with them, walking along the margins of life.

What does it look like to be someone who stands on the boundaries, what does it mean to be someone who walks on the margins of life with others? This morning’s hidden figure is a woman who lives and works in the marginal spaces of society and quietly serves those who need help.

The author of Acts takes us to the city of Joppa, an ancient harbor on the Mediterranean with one selling point for the early first century: convenience. The closest port to Jerusalem, some 40 miles to the west, Joppa is otherwise a terrible place to dock one’s boat. The shallow, rocky waters are edged with shores that seemingly shoot straight up, some one hundred feet.

Fierce winds sweep down the coastline from the north and make the waters nearly impossible to navigate. It was here that Jonah nearly died, having been tossed overboard because the crew was terrified of the tumultuous waters.

Yet, once one moves beyond these steep, rocky shores and into the city and land itself, it is a very different story. The city and surrounding area lives up to its namesake, meaning ‘beautiful’. There are pomegranate and orange trees, green and lush grain fields, and the city’s narrow streets wind their way past tall, ornate homes and places of commerce.

Joppa is a bustling, ancient port where people from regional cultures and ethnicities come together – Egyptians, Central Asians, Syrians, North Africans, Greeks, and Jews. This is a city on the margins: where water meets land, where natives meet foreigners, where poor meet rich, where the flourishing meet the failing.

When we are first introduced to our hidden figure, we immediately understand that this is a woman is someone special. The author provides two names for her: Tabitha, her Aramaic name and Dorcas, her Greek name – she straddles two cultures. Her names mean ‘gazelle’, and the local animal found in and around Israel is a small animal which tends to hang out on the fringes of human habitations. It is neither truly wild nor tame, neither fully of the desert nor of the town. This gazelle lives on the margins.

We’re given another clue into who Tabitha is when the author writes that she is a ‘mathetria’ – the Greek word for disciple. But the form used is unique to this verse and this is the only time that it is used - this is a big deal! Tabitha stepped right up to the edge of the traditional male and female roles that had stood for so long. She wasn’t just a disciple, she was a female disciple. She took on the work of learning what it meant to be a true follower of Christ and she strove to live out the vocation to which she had been called, even though she was a woman.

As the scriptures instructed her to do so, Tabitha took care of the widows of Joppa – those women who were most vulnerable in their society, women who were not valued by the culture at large and usually lived on the margins. A good Jew might give to these women a few pennies or a bit of bread, but we’re told that Tabitha did so much more.

At her death, when Peter has arrived to offer support to the community, these widows show him the garments and tunics which Tabitha had made for them. These are two distinct forms of clothing: one their undergarments and the other their outer garments. Tabitha clothed

these women! She took to heart Jesus' words from Matthew twenty-five: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you gave me clothes to wear. I was sick and you took care of me..."<sup>1</sup>

It's only fitting that the text says that "her life overflowed with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those in need" – this was what she did and for what she was known. Her character matched her name: she was active and watchful as a gazelle, keeping watch over those who lived on the margins. She did so much more than toss a few alms at the feet of these widows, she did so much more than give them the scraps from her table. Tabitha didn't just make sure that these widows were safe, warm, and dry...she fed them, she clothed them, she walked through life with them.

If you were to drive through my hometown of Salida, Colorado, you'd assume that things there are all sunshine and lollipops, and honestly, most of the time for most of the people it is. It's one of the most popular tourist destinations in the state and one of the fastest growing small towns in the country because of the natural beauty, small-town feel, and abundant outdoor activities.

Towns which rely on tourism as their main source of revenue obviously need a cheap labor force, and one of the most exploited groups are the rafting guides. This group of people are much like the migrant workers found in the valley – travelling from job to job as the seasons change to earn money. These men and women risk their lives on the Arkansas River, guiding inexperienced non-swimmers on a boat through intense, extreme, and frigid rapids. At the end of the day, these guides may pocket a hundred dollars and head back to the company campground to sleep alone in tents or in their cars.

The Methodist church in town saw that these guides were living on the margins of the town's society – literally and figuratively – and decided that something needed to be done. While the church members are concerned about just labor laws and higher wages, they knew that they could do more.

Recognizing that these raft guides really just wanted a warm meal and a normal conversation, now, on Wednesday night during the summers, the church hosts dinner for a small crowd of eighty to one hundred raft guides. There's no preaching or proselytizing – just a simple prayer before the meal followed by good food and good conversation. Just like Tabitha's actions

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:35-36, NRSV.

for the widows in Joppa, this church chooses to do what they can where they can with what they have. It's not big, it's not bold, it's not flashy. It doesn't make the headlines in the local newspaper and no one person takes credit for it. The church chooses to serve and love those on the margins closest to them simply because they can.

People living on the margins need advocates like Tabitha and this Methodist congregation because by and large, the world's systems are against them. People on the margins need us to walk with them in the margins.

As the middle school kids and I discussed the situation we were facing in San Antonio, it became apparent that there were larger issues that needed to be dealt with: inadequate healthcare systems and ever-rising medical costs. Neighborhood gentrification and development. Insufficient financial education, predatory loans, and systemic poverty. Food deserts, inadequate public transportation, deficient public education, racial and sexual discrimination.

These are tough things for adults, let alone middle schoolers, to tackle, and it becomes overwhelming because they're seemingly impossible to conquer...feed all who are hungry?...end racism?...clothe all these widows?...raise Tabitha from the dead?

Our hope, our healing, our rescue is found only in God and in God's work in this world. We are not the saviors of this world - that's God's job; and God, "who created the world and raised Jesus from the dead is still active in this world, bringing healing to the diseased, hope to those in despair, and life where death seems to reign."<sup>2</sup> God can – and will – do these things, we must have faith and trust that they will be done.

We are called to walk with people on the margins, people the world labels as marginal; people facing enormous walls, broad chasms, and seemingly endless roads. We are called to do what we can, where we can, with what we have – just as Tabitha, just as the Methodist church in Salida, just as our middle school kids have done. Friends, may our lives overflow with good works and compassionate acts on behalf of those living in the margins. And may we have hope and trust that God will continue to heal and bring all things to new life. May it be so.

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph S. Harvard, "Pastoral Perspective – Acts 9:36-43" from *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Vol. 2, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed., (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 426.