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Psalm 23; Acts 9:36-43

## YOUR MANY MOTHERS

Where are all the women? That was the question Cara Quinn wondered to herself when she first became a Christian in her early 20's. What puzzled Cara was not the lack of women sitting in the pews of her church but rather the absence of women in the stories she heard from the Bible. Her curiosity took her on a quest to learn more about the women of the Bible and early Christian history. Cara combined her master's degree in theology with her background in advertising, design, and illustration to create images of many of those female biblical figures. Some of those images appear on your bulletin cover today. She went on to create an app called "Know Your Mothers" where she offers the images along with scripture readings, reflections, and discussion questions. In creating the portrait for each woman, Cara strove to come up with an image that people today would find relatable, "somebody," she said that "a modern woman might ask out for coffee to talk about what's going on in their lives."

With the exception of a very few, women in the Bible have historically been overlooked. In the patriarchal times in which these stories were first told and then compiled, the male figures feature prominently while the women are often relegated to the background. Where there *are* stories about women, the Christian Church has not often valued these accounts as worthy of lifting up. A great many women featured in biblical stories are not even given a name.

It is important, however, that we do not forget these biblical mothers of ours. These biblical mothers played a crucial role in the story of God's faithfulness to humanity, in the spreading of the message of God's love, in the growth of Christianity, and in modeling Christ-

like care. Just like the male figures in the Bible, our biblical mothers were not perfect people. So, we do not want to romanticize them. But we can and should remember them, make them visible, and respect them for what their lives, their faith, and even their flaws can teach us about the love of God and the presence of God in our lives. We are sitting here today because of these mothers.

And Tabitha is one of them. Tabitha, also called Dorcas, is one of the rare women in the Bible and in the history of the early Church, whose name is actually remembered and recorded. The fact that *both* her Aramaic name and her Greek name are remembered and recorded is an indicator of how important her life and her witness was to the community of believers. While we don't know a lot about Tabitha, what this short passage reveals to us is noteworthy. In our passage today Tabitha is referred to as "a disciple,"—the only time in all of scripture that a female is given that title. Thus, we know she served as a respected leader in the life of her Christian community.

And one of the important ways Tabitha led her community in their Christian faith was by carrying out charitable acts for those in need. As we know from the passage, some of Tabitha's good works included the making of clothing for widows. In the patriarchal world in which they lived, widows were among the most vulnerable members of society. Without the provision and care and protection of a male family member, widows were subject to starvation and abuse. There was no social safety net in place for them. Unless, unless someone like Tabitha stepped in and voluntarily helped them.

We can imagine that Tabitha's good works to the widows extended beyond making clothing for them. We can imagine her preparing food to take to the widows at their homes, her spending time visiting with them and listening to them talk about their lives and their struggles,

her holding the baby so the young widow can run an errand, her tending to the sick and helping clean the house until they are better, maybe organizing some others in the community to extend assistance to those in need. It is possible that Tabitha was a widow herself. Perhaps she was left some degree of financial means after her husband's death. And she used those means as well as her time and efforts to care for others.

And for this she was greatly loved. Following her death, the grief among the community, especially among the widows, was profound. After her death, the community sent word to Peter to come quickly. As was the tradition, they needed to bury her body without delay. Perhaps they turned to Peter because he stood as the chief disciple among those who had followed Jesus. Perhaps they wanted Peter to preside over Tabitha's burial or to offer pastoral comfort to the grieving. It seems hard to imagine that the grieving community anticipated what Peter would in fact do once he arrived—how Peter would raise Tabitha back to life. And by raising Tabitha, Peter also raises the hopes, the prospects, the welfare of all the other widows as well.

Tabitha's faith was put into action on behalf of the most vulnerable. For Tabitha, Jesus' love was not just a nice idea but was made tangible. She fed. She clothed. She listened. She touched. She showed up. God's love became incarnate in her.

Tabitha is one of your mothers. And she's one of my mothers. She modeled what it means to follow Christ and we and our faith are strengthened by her example. There are many other such women in the biblical accounts who also serve as our mothers who, however imperfectly, modeled the faith through their steadfast love of God and others. But because this was the work of women it was not always noticed or valued.

That is also true of the many mothers we have known in our lifetimes. I am not speaking about our birth mothers. Some of our birth mothers may have modeled God's love by how they

supported and cared for us. But not everyone has such a birth mother. Some birth mothers fail their children terribly. However, most of us have known other women in our lives, other mothers who have nurtured us, encouraged us, loved us, forgiven us, provided for us. How many such mothers might you have known in your life?

Think about all the women who minister in a typical church: the women who teach Sunday school, organize charitable fundraisers, feed people at potluck dinners and clean up from the dinners, visit the sick, write the cards, make the phone calls. We are all blessed by the presence of such mothers of the faith in our churches.

Maybe your many mothers were found outside the church. The well-known Hollywood actress Viola Davis has reached the pinnacle of stardom and success. But she has been quite open about the tremendous poverty she experienced as a child. Hunger was a constant presence in her childhood. Sometimes she was so hungry she would have to steal food from the grocery store. But she also recalls with great fondness the various teachers at school who would sometimes offer assistance—especially the female principal would bring bags of hand-me-down clothes to school for Viola, and the joy Viola had in being able to have some of those pretty things.

Tabitha also understood that clothing did more than just cover the body. Clothing confers dignity. Clothing offers something of beauty. Clothing can restore hope. Who were the mothers in your life who extended to you such gifts?

Of course, we also want to remember with thanksgiving the greatest Mother in our lives. The patriarchal world that gave rise to the Bible valued the contributions of men over that of women and so God was thought of in male terms and pronouns. But consider how many of the attributes of God are those we typically associate with women. Mothers give birth. And we

affirm that God has birthed every one of us--not just once, but over and over again throughout our lives God is creating and re-creating us anew. Mothers nurture, mothers nourish, mothers comfort. Mothers teach. Mothers forgive. So does God.

The Twenty-third Psalm is most known for its beautiful image of the shepherd who cares for and protects us, the sheep, and leads us to green pastures. But halfway through the psalm the writer shifts the metaphor. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” We are no longer talking about a shepherd in these final verses. Instead, God is portrayed as a generous hostess. After all, who is it in the household who prepares the table, who sets the table? It’s the women! As we read this psalm, we might try considering God as our generous mother. God is the mother who prepares the food that will nourish our bodies and souls and invites us to the table no matter how badly we may have behaved. God is the mother who offers us care and support in the presence of our enemies—when our internal demons bring upon us depression, anxiety, harmful behaviors. It is God our mother who we can run to when we face our external enemies—when the boss is unfair, when our marriage falls apart, when we get the frightening diagnosis. God is the mother who cooks up a storm before the beloved child arrives home so that the table is overflowing with abundance. We indeed know such abundance from the hand of God. God is the mother who sends us back out into the world, forgiven and redeemed, and charged with caring for others. This is our great Mother, the Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of us all. And to this Mother we give our thanks today.