

Acts 9: 36-43 – Easter 4B

LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE

I recently read a story about a church where one of the members had died. This member was a woman whose husband had died a few years earlier. She was known to be a very wealthy woman, but the people in her church spoke not of her wealth, but of what this woman did. They talked about the cookies that she would bake for church functions. About how she visited people who were sick or shut-in. About the leadership she provided for the youth of the congregation. They talked about how she would be seen standing at the kitchen sink, her arms lathered in soap suds, as she did the dishes after every church dinner. The people felt the need to share these kind of memories because that is what they knew they would really miss – the selfless service that seemed to come so naturally and so easy to this woman.

And they talked an awful lot about her cinnamon rolls!

I think Paul might have recognized this woman when he wrote: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of **life that really is life.**” 1 Timothy 6: 17-19.

Let’s go back to our first reading. Tabitha was just the sort of person that we’ve been talking about. She was known to be a person who was devoted to good works and acts of charity. When Tabitha died her friends sent for Peter, and when he arrived they were quick to show him the same sort of things. According to our first reading “all the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other garments of clothing that Tabitha had made during her life with them.” And we should not forget that in those times widows in the ancient world could not get jobs or take care of themselves. They were dependant on their living relatives, and if they had no relatives, they were completely dependant on charity.

Paul also writes that none of us live to ourselves and none of die to ourselves. There is a link, a tie that binds us together, and although it is a matter of faith, something that is unseen, cannot be weighed or measured, it becomes visible in the ways that we reach out to help other people.

And that's what being a volunteer is all about.

Within the body of Christ there is giving and receiving between this person and that, and it never works out that one person gives or receives precisely what another person gives or gets. We pray, we bake, we clean, we teach, we cry, we spend, we rest, we lift and we carry. We glue little stars on top of construction paper with tiny hands. We wrap parcels to send overseas with wrinkled hands. We work in hospitals and nursing homes. We lead services of worship for shut-ins. We write cheques and sing in choirs, and teach in Sunday Schools, and we take casseroles to people who have lost a loved one to death. We scrub the floor and fix the leaky roof and on and on and on it goes. Within the body of Christ rules are thrown out the window. We get more than we expect and we give more than anyone needs. There is always some left over from the church pot-luck dinner.

This is grace. The conventional wisdom of the world says that we are supposed to give value for value. But volunteers don't act on conventional wisdom. The fact that a volunteer brings you a pie doesn't mean that you have to send one back. You might drop off a plate of cookies two months later. Volunteers are strange people. They seem to assume that they are responsible for the care of those who cannot help themselves.

In our first reading for today we see that Tabitha gave much and died poor. Her wealth lay in the high regard in which she was held by others. And after she was healed she returned to her volunteer work. Not because she had to, but because there was no way to stop her.

"And they'll know we are Christians by our love." Volunteers are known by the care and compassion they display for each other and for all who are in need. By the words that they share and by the lives that they lead. And by living out their faith day after day. May God bless them and be with them always. Amen.