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Belonging with the Saints

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Acts 9:31-43

The Book of the Acts of the Apostles contains the account of the early church spreading across the eastern Mediterranean region. It's full of wind and fire, travel adventures, near escapes, conversion experiences, violent persecution, dramatic moments, and powerful preaching.

Yet, today's text opens with this rather mundane line:

"Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers."

It sounds like a minister's dream: all is well in the congregation. No church conflicts. No controversies or confusion. People merely being the church: showing up to praise God together and share the word of God's love through the community. The church at its best.

When a congregation is healthy and stable it's less consumed with its own interior life and eager to share the good news beyond its walls. Westminster is in such a place these days. Our congregation has weathered the worst of the separation forced on us by Covid. People have found their way here during the pandemic through digital means when they couldn't come in person. And now, as we can do so safely, we are coming back.

Not that it hasn't been hard, especially for families and children, but they and others have shown remarkable resilience through long, difficult months. We can give thanks that through this uncertain time we are still God's beloved community.

"Meanwhile" - with all that drama going on around it - "the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up."

I'm grateful for this window into the everyday life of the early church. No wind or fire, no mysterious appearances or miraculous moments. It's simply the church. It "had peace and was built up." It lived by worshipping God and being led by the Holy Spirit. The church "increased in numbers." It had a promising future.

At a picnic last summer, a seminary classmate I hadn't seen in years sat down and asked, "So, Tim, what's the future for the church in America?"

I had no idea what to say. I thought about quoting from this line in the Book of Acts – basically, that all is well in the church, and it is increasing in numbers. That's certainly true in the global South today, in Africa, and Asia, and Latin America.

It's also true in some local congregations here, as well, like Liberty Community Church in north Minneapolis and Grace-Trinity in Uptown, our two long-time partner churches in the city. They're both doing well. And in our new member class today we're expecting more than 20 people, both in-person and online. (There's still time for you be part of it. Look for Meghan or me after the service.)

My pastor friend was worried about where things are headed for the church in this land, as are many others. He wondered aloud why anyone would go into ministry today. Those concerns are valid if based on statistics. It's not hard to find evidence of the decline of the church if that's what you're looking for.

Yes, there are social crises breaking out all around and the church gets caught up in disputes that divide and deplete us. Yes, there are challenges that diminish the church's ability to impact the world. Yes, forces at work in our culture ignore, reject, deny, and misuse the power of religious faith.

But there's a different way to see things. Throughout history, the more challenging the time in which it finds itself, the more the church shows the power of the Spirit to sustain it, and the more faithful to its calling it becomes.

This is God's church, after all, not ours. And it is full of saints – saints on earth and saints above.

We meet one of them today in the town of Joppa. The story opens with Peter coming down to “the saints living in Lydda,” as it says in Acts. There, after healing a man with paralysis, Peter learns that a woman named Dorcas in the nearby town of Joppa has died. She was an active part of the small Christian community in that seaside city. It's called Jaffa today, and it's still there, now next to the modern Israeli city of Tel Aviv.

Dorcas is the kind of person that keeps the church going in every age. “She was devoted to good works and acts of charity,” we read in Acts. She was not a well-known figure, at least not based on the biblical evidence. She’s mentioned in the Bible only in these few lines. Dorcas made clothes for those who were poor in Joppa. To use the language of Westminster, it’s where she found “her place of usefulness” in that church.

When Peter gets to Joppa, he encounters the ancient equivalent of Presbyterian Women. Maybe it’s Wednesday and the first-century version of WOW is meeting. The women – “widows,” we are told – have gathered to remember their sister Dorcas. They’re weeping and grieving around her body when Peter arrives.

He walks in on a gathering of the beloved community.

They don’t ask Peter to intervene. They begin to tell him the story of Dorcas, whom he probably never knew. They recount her commitment to Jesus and her love for others. They show him some of the clothing she had made to give to those in need – perhaps to some of them.

That would have been enough to convince us of the deep faith of Dorcas, and a fine place to end the story of what was happening in the congregation in Joppa. But then Peter decides to come to the rescue, as he did in Lydda and elsewhere. He ushers all the women out of the room, forcing them to leave Dorcas behind. No sooner does the door close, we are told, than he prays and raises her from the dead.

I admit I'm a little skeptical about this resurrection story tucked in here – the only time Peter is reported to have raised someone from the dead. It's almost as if the male writer of Acts couldn't bear to let the loving witness of a strong woman and the community of faithful sisters who loved her, be the point.

This is not about Peter, it's about a saint of the church named Dorcas. It's about the people behind the scenes in every era, including ours, who have kept the church alive. We may not be able to raise people from the dead but we can visit the sick and work for justice and comfort those who mourn.

As a pastor for nearly four decades, I have learned to appreciate the importance of saints like Dorcas.

Congregations thrive through all kinds of turmoil and challenge because of them. Larger than life leaders like Peter come and go, but it's the folks in the pew, those on the committees, those teaching church school, those ushering and serving coffee and delivering meals, those serving in the community, those that show up to be the church, that really are the hands and feet of the body of Christ.

We heard some of their names earlier in the service. Some were well-known citizens of our town and nation, but most were simply what scripture calls "saints of the church," like Dorcas, who find ways to show the love of Jesus by how they lived and served others...

Maurine Wilson, a long-serving volunteer, quietly coming in each week to help keep records and maintain office supplies. The staff members even named a closet at church for her.

Mark Coulter, one of the long-distance members of Westminster who regularly attended from his home up north via livestream. He would often email me about my sermons and tell me about his life.

Dave Barker, who helped Westminster found the Community Involvement Program 50 years ago, providing services for adults with special needs. Today the organization, known as Accord, serves nearly 3000 people.

Alice Campbell, who faithfully sang in the choir for decades and traveled to Brazil to help establish Westminster's first global partnership, with an Afro-Brazilian seminary led by women.

Maggie Dunnigan, who worked on the church staff for a time, and later became part of the Grief Support Ministry for many years and called on church members.

Saints of the church, like the others on today's list, and like Dorcas long ago.

The first time I heard of Dorcas was as a student pastor in a Chicago congregation comprised of immigrants from Latin America. They introduced me to the idea of Las Damas Dorcas, the Dorcas women. Many churches in Latin America have women's groups named for Dorcas of Joppa. They serve those in need in their communities.

Dorcas Societies were common in American and British churches in the 19th century.

We may not have Las Damas Dorcas in our church, but Dorcas is here every week. They come early to help prepare for worship. They greet people as they enter the building. They make and deliver sandwiches to neighbors outside our door. They volunteer at camp and with the senior center, they re-supply the pews and literature tables. They spend a week of vacation building a Habitat home. They agree to be elected to church office. They tutor children after school. They show up at the state capital to advocate for more just policies. They pray and sing and give to support the church.

They are – we are – the beloved community.

Dorcas is still with us. We remember her and other saints now gone from this earth. Because we remember them, we belong with the saints, those living and those “who from their labors rest.” We will gather with them at the table in a few minutes, in the feast to which God invites us in this life and the next.

Contrary to what some may feel, this is a good time to be the church. The stakes are high, the challenges daunting, the stumbling blocks many. But you and I were never promised it would be easy to follow Jesus.

In every age there have been obstacles confronting the church, yet the saints have persevered. This is no time to give up on the church; the world needs our witness to the love and justice of God, as it has since the earliest days.

“Meanwhile” – in spite of all that was happening around it – “The church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.