

GREATER WORKS

Acts 9:32-43

*Discipleship is a process
powered by the resurrection.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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It's great to be in worship today, and we give thanks for all the moms who encouraged us to be here. For some, that influence is as recent as being dragged out of bed this morning. For others, that influence is decades old. But we still hear her voice, don't we? We thank God for our mothers' influence.

The George Barna organization recently interviewed teenagers in Christian households about their relationships with their moms and dads. They discovered that teens are more likely to eat meals, watch movies and have confrontations with their moms. It was also clear that moms carry most of the conversational weight around the house. Teenagers are more likely to go to their mothers for advice, encouragement, sympathy, and to talk about things that are troubling them. They go to dad if they want to talk about sports or are asking for money.

Mothers are the primary source of spiritual formation for most teenagers in practicing Christian families. The young people talk to their moms more often about God, the Bible, and issues of faith. They pray more with their mothers. The moms are the ones encouraging kids to go to church and explaining faith traditions to them. Alyce Youngblood, Barna's managing editor for this report, says, "Over and over, this study speaks to the enduring impact of mothers—in conversation, companionship, discipline and, importantly, spiritual development."¹

Spiritual development or formation is important because we are not instantaneous Christians. It takes time to grow into a disciple of Jesus. Children and teenagers need a guiding hand to develop their faith, and most Christian education happens at home. So we thank God for Christian parents who pay attention to the faith development of their children. But the adults are also in the process of development; even the parents and grandparents are still learning how to follow Jesus. The process never stops.

Probably the best illustration of spiritual formation in Scripture is the development of the apostle Simon Peter. He was a working man, a fisherman, when Jesus called him and his brother Andrew to follow him. Peter was a man of quick words and action, and Jesus often had to correct him and set him straight when he got out of line. But his love for Jesus was fierce. When Jesus predicted that his disciples would betray him, Peter was

the first to say, “Not me! They may all fall away, but I will defend you with my life!”

Jesus told Peter, “Before the cock crows in the morning, you will deny me three times.” Peter couldn’t believe it, but that’s exactly what he did. He denied three times that he even knew Jesus. When the cock crowed on the morning Jesus was crucified, Peter wept bitterly at his betrayal.

But on the morning of the resurrection, Peter ran to the tomb and found it empty. He was one of the first witnesses of the risen Lord. Somewhat later Jesus cooked breakfast for him and the other disciples by the Sea of Galilee. We talked about that conversation last week. Jesus asked Peter three times if he loved him. Three times Peter said, “Lord, you know I do.” Three times Jesus responded, “Feed my sheep.” Peter had begun the process of redemption; he was coming back. He might make something of himself yet.

In fact, Peter did make something of himself, starting 50 days after Easter. It was the day of Pentecost, when the wind blew through the Upper Room, and tongues of fire lit up the disciples, and they spoke in languages they had not learned. When the people of Jerusalem wondered what was going on, it was Peter who stepped up and gave the first Christian sermon. He told the story of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, and he called the people to repentance. That day 3,000 people responded, repented, and were baptized in the name of Jesus.

After Pentecost, Peter was a key figure in the spread of the Gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. He and John healed a man in the Temple. That got them an interview with the Jewish authorities, which gave Peter another chance to preach. He was instrumental in the ordering of the early Christian community, and he began to travel around the area, meeting with groups of believers and healing the sick. The Book of Acts says, “*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.*”² This Jesus thing was beginning to get some traction.

But then Peter met the biggest challenge he had run into so far. He was in Lydda, a small town 25 miles northwest of Jerusalem. He had healed a

man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years. When the residents saw Aeneas walking around, they turned to the Lord and believed.

But twelve miles away, on the seacoast, in a town called Joppa—it's still there, today called Jaffa—there was a disciple named Tabitha. Her name in Greek was Dorcas; both words mean “gazelle.” Tabitha was already a Christian, and she spent her life doing good and helping the needy. Apparently she made clothes for people. Nothing out of the ordinary really, but Tabitha was extraordinary in her care and devotion to those who were less fortunate than her. She did good with her hands.

Reading about Tabitha reminds me of our Knitters and Knotters group at the church. These ladies (and one man) have two ministries going. They knit prayer shawls for sick people and hats for the Guatemala mission trip. Another part of the group ties plastic grocery bags into sleeping mats for schoolchildren and homeless people. It's quite an operation every Thursday morning. When they're done, they gather in a circle around the week's production, and they pray for those who will receive the mats and shawls and hats, that they would feel the love and the spirit that went into making these simple items.

None of the Knitters and Knotters will get rich or famous doing their ministry on Thursday morning, although they did get an article in the local paper a couple of times. But that's not the point, is it? Those mats and shawls and caps mean something to the people who get them. Their faces light up; they know someone cares for them. If the Knitters and Knotters have a spiritual godmother, I think it would be Tabitha of Joppa 2,000 years ago.

Unfortunately, Tabitha became ill and died. This was tragic, because this meant that her ministry died with her, and there were not many advocates for the poor in that day and time. Her friends had heard that Peter was nearby in Lydda—two hours' walk away—and so they went and got him.

When Peter got to Tabitha's house, the widows, the poor women that Tabitha had been helping, were crying and clinging to articles of clothing that she had made for them. Peter cleared the room and prayed, then he said, “Tabitha, get up.” In the common language of the people, Peter probably said, “*Tabitha cum.*”

Wait a minute. When Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus, the leader of the synagogue in Capernaum, he said “*Talitha cum,*” which means “Little girl, get up.” The similarity was not lost on Luke’s readers. Jesus had promised, “*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*”³ Here was Peter—fisherman, disciple, denier, preacher—doing the greatest work that Jesus ever did—raising the dead! Tabitha was experiencing personally and literally the resurrection of Jesus at the hand of Peter! The reaction was amazing, but not surprising: “*This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord.*”⁴

But even then, Peter was not through developing as a disciple. His spiritual formation was not complete. In the very next chapter, he has the vision that allows him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. He would travel from Israel to Rome and become the founder of the Christian movement in the capital city of the empire. By the end of his life, Peter would become what Jesus named him to be: “*You are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my church.*”⁵

This is the Gospel for us today. We can see it clearly in Peter; we can see it in any disciple we want to study; we can see it in ourselves: the spiritual life is a process. It never ends until we enter the kingdom of heaven when we die. Our life in God is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, powered by the resurrection power of Jesus. It is usually not extraordinary. It’s like the life of Tabitha—“*devoted to good works and acts of charity.*”⁶ It’s just plodding along, doing the best we can, using the means of grace that God has given us to know God better: prayer, Scripture, worship, sacraments, Christian friendship, acts of mercy. It’s not hip or cool or glamorous or slick or sexy. It’s just about following Jesus.

Rachel Held Evans has written several books and many blogs on the spiritual search and the Christian life for Millennials (young adults between 25 and 40). Contrary to the stereotype of young adults, Rachel was all about the traditional values of the church. In an interview, she said, “If you try to woo us back with skinny jeans and coffee shops, it may actually backfire. Millennials have finely tuned B.S. meters that can detect when someone’s

just trying to sell us something. We're not looking for a hipper Christianity. We're looking for a truer Christianity."

The interviewer asked, "If these aren't the answer, what is?"

Rachel replied, "Sharing Communion. Baptizing sinners. Preaching the Word. Anointing the sick. Practicing confession. You know, the stuff the church has been doing for the last 2,000 years. We need to creatively re-articulate the significance of the traditional teachings and sacraments of the church in a modern context. That's what I see happening in churches, big and small, that are making multigenerational disciples of Jesus."⁷

Rachel Held Evans was herself a study in spiritual formation. She grew up in Dayton, TN; if that rings a bell, it was the site of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925, in which William Jennings Bryan successfully defended a law forbidding the teaching of evolution. As a young adult, Rachel left the fundamentalist church of her upbringing, but unlike many young adults, she didn't leave the church altogether. She poked and prodded around different kinds of churches until she ended up an Episcopalian. Her writings are challenging but gracious, advocating for women in ministry (which is still not a thing in many churches) and openness to all people.

She also said that the spiritual life is powered by the resurrection: "It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our despair."⁸

In April, Rachel shared on social media that she was suffering from the flu, then that she had been hospitalized with an infection and a reaction to some antibiotics she had been given. The week before Easter, she was placed in a medically-induced coma, and last Saturday, she died. Rachel was 37; she left behind her husband and two children, a 3-year-old and a one-year-old.

Her last blog post was on Ash Wednesday, March 6, and it proved to be prophetic: "It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on. Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or you doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called 'none' (whose faith experiences far transcend the limits of that label) you know this truth deep

in your bones: ‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.’ Death is a part of life. My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone.’⁹

We are not alone on this journey. The risen Christ is with us, and his resurrection power can raise us up from despair, depression, disease, and even death itself.

James Howell, who is a United Methodist pastor in Charlotte, NC, was visiting an orphanage in Kenya that is supported by his church. When it came time to worship, a 19-year-old orphan named Lena preached in Swahili about Peter raising Tabitha from the dead. Howell didn’t understand a word of Swahili, but he was moved by the sermon. First Lena began to stroke some of the wonderful fabric Tabitha had made into clothes for the widows. Then she lay down on the dirt floor, still as death. She got up on her knees and began to weep audibly for Tabitha. Then an imaginary Peter came into the room, and Lena took his hand and stood up, alive again.

Folks like us—mostly white, middle-class, educated church people—we think the resurrection is real nice. It’s all fine and good. But if you are an orphan in Kenya, living in the dirt and the heat and barely surviving, an inch away from death every day, this is powerful stuff. This is the best news ever! When Lena finished her sermon, the congregation of orphans laughed and cried and shouted and danced. The dead was raised! Howell said it just went on and on.¹⁰

This is the good news—the great news—today! There is a power at work in the world that overcomes death. It’s the resurrection power of Jesus, and that power will cause us to be devoted to good works and acts of charity, to take care of the poor, to change lives, to transform communities. This is the shape of our journey. This is the power of God among us and in us and through us to the world.

¹ “The Powerful Influence of Moms in Christians’ Households,”

<https://www.barna.com/research/moms-christians-households/>.

² Acts 9: 31.

³ John 14:12.

⁴ Acts 9:42.

⁵ Matthew 16:18.

⁶ Acts 9: 36.

⁷ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5866/rachel-held-evans-on-the-ills-of-american-christianity-and-leaving-evangelicalism>.

⁸ <https://www.newsweek.com/remembering-rachel-held-evans-quotes-faith-god-and-church-progressive-1415735>.

⁹ <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lent-for-the-lamenting>.

¹⁰ James Howell, “Weekly Preaching: May 12, 2019,” *MinistryMatters.com*.