

It Ain't Magic  
Acts 9:32-43  
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Several years ago, a prominent Fairbanksan from my congregation passed away. He was well loved by the congregation and in the community. He was a former Vice-President of the University of Alaska System, very active in Rotary, and had recently been honored for his work with Boy Scouts of America. Our sanctuary seated 250 so we put an additional 50 seats in the Narthex and hoped we could manage the overflow. In the Fellowship hall we set up every single folding table and chair the church owned for the reception following the service. We prayed there would be enough food to handle the crowd...

The crowd, though, was only about 100 people. Art died the week prior to Fourth of July weekend. The family decided it would work well for family members traveling from afar to come on a holiday weekend. It was great for the family. But most of the people who would likely have come didn't because of the long weekend.

I've often wondered, "If I died, who would come to my funeral? If I died, would anybody care?" Now, I used to think that my thoughts like that were pretty weird. But, now I know, you often think about the very same things I do. We just don't talk about it very much!

Tabitha didn't have to wonder who would care if she died. When she was raised up she got to see all the saints and widows who had come to minister to her in death.

Why did they come? Was it because she was rich and powerful? Did they come because she was the most creative or prolific seamstress in all of Joppa? No. Indeed, she was a seamstress, but what does it say in vs 36? She "was always doing good and helping the poor."

If we oversimplify, there are two kinds of people in this world...those who serve themselves and those who serve others, servants.

Self-servers are the rich and powerful, people who run things their own way and must always accumulate more and more, because they believe in their gut there will never be enough to go around. Servants on the other hand, are people who instinctively believe that God loves ALL humanity: rich, poor, Jew, Greek, male, female.

Makes you think, doesn't it? Which camp do you find yourself falling into? Truth be told, there is some 'self-server' in all of us, and also some servant.

Self-servers build roads and great information systems. They erect soaring skyscrapers, design beautiful clothing, engineer incredible computer networks, negotiate complex business deals, and keep jets in the air 24/7.

Servants, in contrast, are committed to loving outcasts in an extraordinary way. They volunteer in soup kitchens, run foot clinics for the homeless, play bingo with nursing home residents, and devote a week of vacation every year to doing mission work. Although the self-server approach to life is very different from the self-server concept, the two are not mutually exclusive. We can be both Self-server and servant, regardless of our age, economic status, political affiliation or our day-to-day job description.

The question is: What kind of focus does God want us to have? The world tends to reward self-servers, but the Lord has an incredible incentive package for the servants of this earth.

Today's story takes place in the coastal city of Joppa, a rough-and-ready center of commerce, full of self-servers anxious to find an angle, do a deal, and turn a buck. And when the apostle Peter comes to town, he stays with one of these local entrepreneurs, Simon the tanner — a man who works with animal skins, a ritualistically unclean profession. That, however, is another story. You'll hear more about Simon in a couple weeks when you get to chapter 10.

In Joppa, there is a small Christian community founded by Philip the evangelist. One of the disciples is a woman named Tabitha, an Aramaic name that means "gazelle," and as we heard, it means Dorcas in Greek. The first thing we learn about Tabitha is that she "was always doing good and helping the poor." (Acts 9:36), which means that she ranks as one of the true servants of the world.

But wait — we also discover that she is well known for making robes and other fine clothing. She's a Joppa entrepreneur, a businesswoman who may have accumulated some significant wealth through her stitching. Along with being a servant she's got a self-server streak as well.

As the story begins, Tabitha becomes ill and dies. The loss of this servant-leader devastates the Christian community, and the church members send an urgent message to Peter, "Please come at once!" When Peter arrives, the widows are in an upper room, gathered around the body of Tabitha, weeping and showing the fine clothing she had made. Peter shoos them out the door, kneels to pray, and then says to the body, "Tabitha,

get up.” Miraculously, she opens her eyes, sees Peter, and sits up. It’s not magic. Peter follows the example Jesus set when he healed Jairus’ daughter in Luke 8:51-55 except that Peter prayed first. Peter knew from where the power to heal came; not by magic, not from within himself. He knew it came from Jesus. So he prayed and simply said, “Tabitha, get up.”

And, she did. You can just imagine the reception she receives.

Tabitha is restored to life as a sign of the death-defeating power of Jesus, and the news of this miracle races through Joppa, causing many to believe in the Lord (v. 42). But Tabitha is raised for another reason as well, one that is bound to hit close to home for many of us: The Lord needs self-servers who are willing to be servants as well.

The significance of Tabitha’s life was that she blended together her ambition and her compassion. She didn’t keep the two apart, toiling over robes 50 hours a week, and then performing an isolated act of charity with whatever time she had left over. No, the text reports that she “was ALWAYS doing good and helping the poor.” (v. 36), meaning these activities played a central role in her day-to-day life. She may even have turned her sewing work into mission work, creating robes and clothing for the widows and orphans of the community. She kept the self-server and servant sides of herself together, united in a single, seamless existence.

What’s the chance that we can do the same today?

Have you noticed true happiness cannot be found in the culture of materialism? It cannot be discovered in the patterns of the past, in lives based on the fantasy world of 1960s sitcoms –despite my allusion to one of my favorite grade school TV shows, Bewitched, where a character named Tabitha had to manually twitch her nose to perform magic. Today we want and deserve something better. We want a good life, real happiness and an opportunity to do something worth doing. We want to be able to live our lives and even offer them, if required, for something worthy of sacrifice.

We want a good life, not just a good living. We want to be both self-server AND servant.

We can pursue this goal by following the example of Tabitha, who turned her sewing work into mission work and had a powerfully positive effect on the city around her. We can keep our self-server and our servant sides together by seeing our day-to-day work as an opportunity to treat every human being as precious to God.

Perhaps your Joppa is a post office or grocery store. Servant-clerks face long lines of customers without haste or confusion. They engage customers with smiles and

conversation, and in so doing erase the annoyance of waiting. Servant clerks see their daily work as mission work; they turn everyday transactions into meaningful human experiences.

Perhaps your Joppa is a large company. In that type of workplace, servant-professionals look for opportunities to guide a young person, mentor a subordinate, or minister to a colleague in need. They do well by doing good, by making sure that business is done with honesty, integrity and responsiveness to the community. Good self-servers can also be good servants.

Or perhaps your Joppa is a home or a classroom. In these particular settings, there are so many chances to be a role model, set an example, and pass on an insight or skill. Children and young people are desperate for guidance about how to make a good life, and they are always looking up to their parents and teachers for instructions and examples. They may not ask for help, but they want it ... and need it.

Your Joppa might be a hospital, a 501(c)3 charitable Board room , a political office, or a church.

Wherever your Joppa is use it as your base for being both a self-server and a servant. Don't focus entirely on doing deals, creating products, and making money, because these achievements are bound to be limited, and they'll lead only to worldly rewards. If we want the renewed life that Tabitha enjoyed, be a Self-server who is, in fact a servant, and loves EVERYONE, regardless of race, gender, education level, political association, social viewpoint or faith, as precious to God.

It's not magic and it's not by our own power. It's all about the power of Jesus Christ working in and through us.

Let us pray...

Lord Jesus, in the story of Tabitha we glimpse your power. It transforms a community around a disciple committed to servanthood, a community where the poor have enough, where the sick are made whole, where new life comes even to those who are dead.

We long to see your power at work among us. As Joppa called on Peter long ago, we call on you, "Please come at once." Heal us; renew our lives that we too might respond by always doing good and helping the poor. In your mighty name we pray. Amen.