

Reflection 28 June 2020

“A disciple called Tabitha, or in Greek, Dorcas, who never tired of doing good or giving to those in need.”

Acts 9:36

Rev. Dr Niki Francis

The French artist Louise Bourgeois, who died in 2010, often worked with fabric. She said this:

I've always had a fascination with the needle, the magic power of the needle. The needle is used to repair the damage.¹

I have reflected on this during the week, keeping in mind the damage and pain Covid-19 is causing in the world, as well as other painful experiences that damage us emotionally and psychologically. We have all experienced some form or forms of damage and pain in our lives. We all respond in our own ways. Damage and pain also occurs on a systemic level. We can never know the full or even partial truths of what others have experienced, what hurts they carry. And that is a reason to be kind. Surely.

Back to the power of the sewing needle. My reflections led me to the story of Dorcas that Gavin just read for us.

Scholars generally accept that the author of Luke's gospel also wrote Acts. Luke translated Dorcas's Aramaic name into the Greek Tabitha to reach his Greek audience. In some translations she is called Dorcas, in others Tabitha. I will call her Dorcas because that is her original name. Plus, for me the name Tabitha is tainted by memories of the 1960s US sitcom 'Bewitched' in which the young woman Tabitha is a witch who makes magic by wiggling her nose!

Dorcas lived in Joppa, which is now the suburb Jaffa in Tel Aviv, Israel. All we know of Dorcas is in the Acts story. Yet it tells us a lot about her. “She filled her days with acts of kindness and charity....” (New English Bible). Charity

¹ Louise Bourgeois in Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010: xix

implies almsgiving or financial support. She was so loved and revered and her ministry so valued that when she died the 'disciples' send for Peter who they had heard was nearby in Lydda – 16 kilometres away. Having rushed to Joppa, Peter meets the women in Dorcas's community – the widows, who are bereft over her death. Through their tears, they show Peter the tunics and other clothes Dorcas made for them. Peter sends them away from the upper room, kneels beside Dorcas, prays and brings her back to life.

Dorcas's story is preceded by a much shorter and less detailed story of Peter's healing of Aeneas, a paralysed man who has been bedridden for eight years. But Dorcas's story is more powerful. Peter heals Aeneas but restores life to Dorcas. Such interventions are designed to encourage converts and demonstrate how women are valued in the emerging church.

There are three aspects of Dorcas's story I want to talk about.

First, its relationship to other biblical stories:

This story about Dorcas sits in a tradition of healing and resurrection stories told to emphasise God's power in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus's power via God in the Christian Bible.

It has parallels in First Kings (1 Kings 17:8-24) where Elijah resurrects the widow of Zarephath's son, and Second Kings (2 Kings 4:8-37) where Elisha restores to life the Shunnamite woman's son. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus resurrects the widow of Nain's son.

Thus, in the stories about Dorcas and Aeneas, the author demonstrates that the emerging church continues the Hebrew bible tradition of God's power to intervene and reverse disability and death. Luke gives Peter the same power as Jesus to heal the sick and give new life to the dead. In modern terms, we would say Luke markets his claims of Peter's miraculous gifts to win converts to Christianity.

Second, Luke describes Dorcas as a disciple. This is the only time the feminine form of the word *mathetria*, Greek for disciple, occurs in the Christian Bible. In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke tends to give more prominence to women than men, perhaps to emphasise how the new church differs from wider society of the time in which women have little voice.

Dorcas's work of sewing and financial support is shown as an ongoing concern relevant to a particular group – the widows. Widows were among the most vulnerable people in first century Palestinian society. Their situation began to change in the early church, which recognised the truth of the prophet Joel's declaration that 'your sons and daughters will prophesy' (Joel 2:28) ... and in Acts the declaration that 'both men and women will prophesy' (Acts 2:17,18). By the time Luke wrote Acts in the late first century, the widows were a recognised group with standing in the community.

But they were not only a group that received charity. According to the letters to Timothy and Titus, the community in turn expected the widows to serve the community. This led to the establishment of an order which many scholars suggest was the forerunner of monastic orders for women. The widows referred to in Dorcas's circle are likely to have been part of this early church group, and it is likely they met at Dorcas's house, because she had some sort of leadership role and she had the space and the means to offer hospitality and support.

However, the relative equality of women in the early church did not last. It threatened Roman social order. To maintain social acceptance the church assumed the patterns of the Roman Empire. We sold out to power early on and the roles and details of women's stories were lost for centuries.

The third aspect of the story I want to touch on, is the fact that Dorcas was a seamstress. She sewed for the poor widows and they loved her for it. Imagine having no means to buy cloth to make your own clothes. Your garments are fraying and the fabric wears thin. Your tunic no longer keeps out the cold and

you feel shame at having to appear ragged in public. For the poor, their tunics were all they had to keep the cold out when sleeping. Imagine how much it would mean if someone cared enough to stitch clothes for you, so that you could resurrect some self-respect. Dorcas did this for the disadvantaged widows – the women who had no means of support.

And so, as Louise Bourgeois said, “the needle is used to repair the damage.” Or it can be.

I have friends here in Wellington who knit, sew and crochet for charitable organisations that need clothing and equipment for babies and children, clothing for adults, beanies for cancer patients. You can read more about that in this week’s newsletter.

Dorcas used the magic power of the needle of which Louise Bourgeois spoke. As do my friends who sew for Crafty Volunteers. Sewing for the widows and the giving of alms was Dorcas’s way of love, her way of living the values of the man Jesus who lived not long before her. There are many ways – Dorcas’s way was one and 20 centuries on, we remember her for it.

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What does this mean for us now? In this reading from Acts we see an attempt to attract people to the church with the performance of miracles. And we see a woman who lives the love Jesus called for.

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I imagine that the St Andrews community is reflecting on who you are and your place here in Aotearoa, as you explore the directions you wish to take in your search for a new minister or new leadership model. I have no idea of the process you are engaged in, but I know that some of the questions I would be asking are ‘what keeps people in the church?’, what keeps you coming regularly to St Andrews on The Terrace?’ I know some of you travel distances to reach here each Sunday. What entices you here? Community? Music? Habit? Biblical tradition and story? All the above? The message of love and

challenging call to action for justice? That is the uncomfortable one on the list! They are all good reasons! But I wonder what church is if it doesn't harness the loving energy of community to question what kind of country we want for our children and grandchildren and future generations.

Can our community here be the needle and thread that helps repair some of the damage, that sets about doing what we can to achieve a kinder, more equitable society by responding to concerns about the environment, racism and inequality that threaten our very being?

The magic power Louise Bourgeois spoke of, the healing power of needle and thread, is not the miraculous intervention of biblical stories. It relies on the practical, down-to-earth commitment to action from people like us.

Amen