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Lesson: Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30

²²At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.” ²⁵Jesus answered, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. ³⁰The Father and I are one.”

This past week I took my daughters to the community pool for some swim lessons. As they were practicing putting their faces under the water with their teacher, there were other kids in the pool splashing and playing. Of course, one of the ubiquitous games played in this setting is Marco Polo. One person in the pool is “*It*” and they keeps their eyes closed, calling out, “Marco!” and the other players reply, “Polo!” Using only touch and sound, the person who is *It* tries to tag anyone else, making them the new *It*. The game is a lot like another activity, called a Trust Walk. This is where someone is blindfolded and then led around and through obstacles only by listening to the instructions of someone who is observing them. Both of those are fun activities... that is if the person who is unable to see has some level of trust in the other people. If a stranger asked to blindfold me in order to play a game, I would respectfully decline.

At the most basic level, those games are a lot like our relationship with God. We call out for help, and we trust in the response we receive. The response often does not paint the whole landscape for us, nor does it detail an exact path to follow. God's response, unlike the games, is rarely perceived in audible words. God’s response is more like a nudge; it is a sense of direction for

what the possible next steps could be. So we take a step and then we call out again. Another nudge comes in response, and the pattern continues. In the games of Marco Polo and Trust Walk, physical proximity to one another is the goal, but with God the goal is about the trust that is built. We grow to trust God to lead us through dark or unknown territory. Like sheep and a shepherd calling out to find one another, there is an element of searching in our relationship with God. That searching does not negate the trust, it actually helps to build it.

I believe the search leads us to discover the ways that Christ does the daily work of resurrection, and then we join him in it. “Daily work of resurrection” means Christ goes to places of hopelessness to bring hope, Christ goes to places of suffering in order to be present in it, and Christ goes to places of turmoil to bring peace. These might not appear to be miraculous or extraordinary, but Christ is there, nonetheless, doing work of bringing life out of death.

In today’s gospel lesson, there is more to Jesus’s work than meets the eye. The passage ends with Jesus saying, “The Father and I are one.” In that short phrase, rather than using the masculine form of the word “one,” the neuter form is used. You might be thinking, “That’s Greek to me,” ...and you would be correct; it is! All you need to know is that the difference points us in a certain direction to understand what Jesus meant by the word “one” here. Jesus wasn’t referring to the metaphysical relationship between himself and the Father, he was referring to the work that they do as being one. Jesus has been approached by some people who want to know more about him and the work he is doing, and the conversation ends with him effectively saying his work and the Father’s work are the same.

This leads us to a challenge of this gospel passage. You may have picked up on how in this lesson the writer John again harshly characterizes the Jews of his day as antagonistic. There is some backstory that must be shared. When John was writing his gospel, it was decades after the earthly ministry of Jesus. During John’s time a significant portion of Christians were Jewish, and Christianity was understood as falling under the umbrella of Judaism with other sects, like the Pharisees. It was common practice for the sects to debate Jewish theology and their cultural practices. This Christian sect would debate with the other Jewish sects about the nature of Jesus and whether he was the awaited Messiah or not. That was par for the course. Yet, as more Gentiles joined the Christians, the

normal debates were less like in-house squabbles and more like heated arguments across cultural lines. We objectively know today that John inserted these more heated arguments of his own day back into the gospel story that he was writing. Doing so often makes Jesus sound as if he were antagonistic toward Judaism, like in today's lesson, when in reality any debate he had probably looked like normal Jewish discourse.

The reason why I'm disclosing that this morning is because with that knowledge we can make better sense of the work Jesus discusses. Like Jesus said, his work and the Father's work is one. Where there is desperation, hopelessness, and suffering in this world, the resurrection work Jesus does brings peace, hope, and aid to those places. When he refers to his followers as his sheep – that he knows us and we follow him – and he attaches that to the work he does, he is saying this: as we draw closer to the Divine, and the Divine draws closer to us, this often takes place in the work of bringing peace, hope, and aid to this world. Something amazing, holy, and beautiful is that Jews will say the covenantal relationship they have with God leads them to do that same work of repairing this world. Jesus can be our shepherd as Christians, allowing us to join in the work he shares with the Father, and Jews can join with God through their covenant to do this work as well.

One example of a Christian who engaged in this work of repairing the world is Tabitha. She is the focus of our first lesson today. Granted, she doesn't do much in the lesson because she is dead for most of it, but when we dig into the text we can get a better picture of how her faith was lived out. I need to give credit to The Rev. Danae Ashley and biblical scholars Dr. Beverly Gaventa and Dr. Raj Nadella for their work that has brought some key insights to light for me. For starters, the first verse of this lesson is the only time that the word "disciple" appears in its feminine form in scripture. That is a major clue to understanding the integral role Tabitha played in her faith community. A literal translation verse 36 tells us, "[Tabitha] was full of good deeds and alms which she continually did." Those alms indicate that she was a person of means. We are soon told that when Peter arrived and found her dead in bed, the widows were "weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that [she] had made." This tells us that Tabitha likely cared for these widows financially and viewed serving them as part of her personal ministry. Widows were usually at the margins of society, and in that day someone with wealth would normally hoard it. Tabitha, however,

saw wealth as a way to care for those who were so often trampled on and discarded by society. Clearly that was influenced by her trust in God.

One of the ironies of the story of Tabitha is how timeless it is. You see, earlier in Acts there were seven men who were selected to be deacons in Jerusalem. That means they were called to oversee the ministries of care for the poor and marginalized in that city. We know the seven men were appointed, but – interestingly – we are never told if they actually did the work. Over in another city, called Joppa, lives Tabitha. There is no mention in Acts whether deacons were appointed to serve the poor and marginalized in that city. However, we are told Tabitha did the work. So, the irony is that even in Acts we have an example of a woman who does the work but who never receives the title.

Although a title would have been a good thing, Tabitha didn't need a title to validate her ministry. The real validation came when the widows spoke up about the important work she did. Peter arrived and he was immediately surrounded by the widows' testimonies about the ministry Tabitha had done. The culmination of the story is that Peter's prayer gives life back to Tabitha. What isn't explicitly said, though, is how Tabitha's work in God's name had already brought life to so many others. It seemingly formed a beloved community, and out of that community's testimony Tabitha received her life again.

The work that God does is the work that Jesus does. It is one and the same. It brings repair, healing, and care to this world. Jesus reveals today that our encounter with him as the Good Shepherd is tied to the work of healing this world. Tabitha is an excellent example of a Christian who joined in this work. Her ministry brought compassion, care, and dignity to others, even though society sought to discard those women and their interests. Through the work of Jesus, Tabitha and the widows came to be a beloved community and the daily work of resurrection was in their midst, and quite literally one day. May we, like Tabitha, call out to our shepherd and trust the nudges to have an encounter with the Divine. These nudges will point us to the work of caring for the poor and seeing the dignity in those who find themselves trampled by this world. In the process, we will be guided toward lives that are centered on caring and service, and finding ourselves in a beloved community. Thanks be to God. Amen.