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“Here We Receive New Life”
3. In Our Attitudes About Violence

Acts 9:36-43 36 Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. 37 At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. 38 Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." 39 So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. 40 Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. 41 He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. 42 This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. 43 Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Some of you have asked me how in the world this scripture, the latest in our post-Easter sermon series on how Easter's good news can lead to new life in us, possibly connects to the topic of new life in our attitudes towards violence. Fair question. But I want to say, and I hope to show, that this short and intriguing story from the Book of Acts indeed both encapsulates something very true about our lives and can suggest to us how God might want us to respond to violence. The key to doing so lies in the very last two words of the story: "a tanner." *"Meanwhile [Peter] stayed for some time in Joppa with a certain Simon, a tanner."*

Do you know anything about the tanning of leather? It's a nasty and vile business. I will spare your stomach the details but I suggest that you look it up on Wikipedia, if you want (but don't do so after you've eaten - it's a pretty gruesome tale). Moreover, the very art of tanning leather is, of course, only possible due to death and

violence. It reminds me of that hoary old joke about the pig and the chicken who decided to open a restaurant together. "What shall we name it," the pig asked? "How about 'Ham and Eggs,'" said the chicken. Whereupon the pig responded, "I don't think so. After all, for you that would be a contribution; for me it would be a sacrifice." The point? It is indeed inescapable that you and live in a complex world where our lives are made possible at times by the sacrifice of other lives. No matter how we may try to avoid this truth, or pretty it up with clever packaging, it is simply the case that death and violence are a part and parcel of our lives.

But at the same time, there is the other side of this scripture: Peter's reviving Tabitha from death. Now, I don't want to talk about the "mechanics" of how this could have possibly happened; I'm not interested in the many articles written about this from a variety of perspectives that want to either somehow "prove it really did happen or, on the contrary, that try to explain how it might have been that Tabitha wasn't "really" dead. I think such discussions miss the point. No, the more important point is that what Peter was doing was the very same thing that God assures us that God is always doing: seeking to bring goodness out of hurt and pain and even death. I'm reminded of the lovely story about some of Fred Rogers' best advice, passed along from his mother when there were sad or terrible things in the news:

"My mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so

many helpers — so many caring people in this world."¹

In other words, our scripture this morning is, I think, an apt and compact kind of summation of our lives: we cannot escape the fact that our lives are formed in the context of **both** death and life, **both** harshness and healing, **both** violence and vulnerability. There is both goodness and destructiveness at work in our lives.

And so, in turn, as I have said so often, scripture comes to us as both a description of the way our lives in fact are but also as a *challenge* to us. And that challenge this morning is for each of us to decide how and where we will fall on that scale of violence versus peaceableness, of using our actions to harm versus being one of those helpers that Mr. Rogers spoke of. And yet, it is not at all a simple or easy thing to think about, is it? Even the most peaceable have sometimes decided that violence is the only option. The great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his early life was a pacifist, committed to non-violence. Yet he came to the conclusion that in the face of Hitler's horrific evils he would help conspire to assassinate him. On the other hand, even those who might be prone to use violence have sometimes decided for peaceableness. Martin Luther King, Jr., talked candidly about how his first reaction in the face of Sheriff Bull Connors' dogs and fire-hoses and in the face of the bombing of black churches and the murder of little girls going to Sunday School was to respond with violence himself and yet he made the choice for a non-violent response. For the first three centuries after the life of Jesus, Christians almost universally believed that Jesus wanted them to be pacifists; and so they refused to fight for the Romans when

¹<http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/scarynews.asp>

they were drafted and that was one of the reasons that they were so fiercely persecuted by the Empire.

No, it is not as easy as some would think. We live in a world that is not yet the Kingdom and so short of that Kingdom you and I will always have to grapple both faithfully and yet imperfectly in knowing how violence can legitimately be a part of a Christian's life and yet without blessing every form of violence as justified. It is why the Church for centuries has said that while sometimes war may be inevitable it must always be fought within the bounds of what are called the "Just War" rules – including not indiscriminately killing the innocent. It's why we want our police to have the tools of violence and yet need and expect them (as every good police officer will tell you) not to be indiscriminate in their use, and why they are trained in defusing conflict as a first reaction, not escalating it, even as they carry the tools of escalation on their belts. It's why we want and need (as, again, any good police officer will tell you) to root out and punish those police who do forget these things and discriminate against and hurt those whom they are supposed to protect.

No, it's not easy, it's not easy. And so back to our question: what does the reality of life lived in an imperfect world, a world that is not yet the Kingdom, a world where you and I are inescapably part of a context of both life and death, peaceableness and violence, mean for how you and I should respond to that world, and how our words and actions can manifest the new life that God is calling us to. Let me offer two suggestions for how we do so.

First, let us stop using the word and the metaphor of "war" to describe everything that we are opposed to. As a society, we have had a War on Poverty, a War on Drugs,

a War on Illiteracy and so on and so on. Such a metaphor, though, is the enemy of nuance and thoughtfulness. The whole concept of “war” includes with it the idea of defeating, destroying, and decimating. The whole concept of “war” is inescapably violent. But it is not always helpful. The “War” on “drugs” led to mandatory sentencing which has had disastrous effect on minority communities in our country and has stripped from thoughtful and compassionate judges the power to respond to crime with creativity and nuance in ways that might both hold folks accountable but also offer the possibility of transformation. You see, when the notion of “war” becomes the first and often the only thing we think of in the face of a social problem we are likely to forget that the prophet Isaiah called for us to “reason together,” not simply make war together. And as the old saying goes, if the only tool you have is a hammer then every problem begins to look like a nail. Likewise, if the only tool you have is war, then every social, moral, and even religious problem looks like a battle to be fought and won. And that inevitably and thoughtlessly escalates the violence around us and the violence that gets inside of us.

Second, I would invite you to join me in asking our leaders to stop talking so much about **fighting**. When Ted Cruz and Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton all talk virtually nonstop about how they are “fighting for you,” I want to say “No, I want you to **think** well on my behalf not just ‘fight.’” For you see, the more “fighting” as the only motif in our civic life invades our heads, the less able we are to deal with those things that don’t require just our boxing gloves, and the more we tend to reduce others to dehumanized strawmen at which to sling our one-dimensional slogans. Television and the internet thrive on such warlike oversimplifications but that does

nothing to up-build, as St. Paul said, our life together as a people. As conservative political commentator and evangelical religious leader Michael Gerson says, “The standards and values of reality television — the exaggerated feuds, the personal vilification and the deleted expletives — have invaded the political realm.” And they have also invaded our heads and our spirits, haven’t they, making it that much harder to try to faithfully navigate how as Christians we respond to the complex problems and opportunities before us. The continual use of “war” and “fighting” metaphors by our culture worries Mr. Gerson; he calls it the loss of “good manners” and says such “manners involve an affirmation that we, all of us, are part of the same community, and that everyone is due a certain minimal amount of respect. Poor manners, in contrast, can indicate the dehumanization of individuals and groups.”² And that, my friends, does not lead to new and renewed and transformed life, but exactly the opposite. It does not lead to you and I being persons of nuance and thoughtfulness, but persons who are more and more calloused and less and less inclined to see the people we live with in this world as fellow children of God.

Throughout the scriptures, in both Testaments, there is repeated testimony that words are incredibly powerful, that words – in the words of one philosopher – actually make our world, and that the words we use can therefore either make us more prone to the violence of demonizing and dehumanizing others – or not. Nowhere is that more clearly stated than in these haunting lines from the Book of Proverbs: “Rash words are

²https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/this-election-proves-why-manners-matter/2016/04/04/92748de0-fa8f-11e5-886f-a037dba38301_story.html

like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18). I have to think that the Apostle Paul, good Jew that he was, knew those wise words when he added his own: “ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up... so that your words may give grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29). There may be, in our lives and in our world, times when violence is unavoidable or even necessary as the least among evils. But violent words and actions are never, ever to be a first resort. No, the first resort, in your life and mine ought to be the same as Peter’s so long ago with Tabitha – for while our words will not resurrect the dead, our words always do have the power to build up instead of tear down, to be those of the helpers and not the violators, to bring new life and new hope. And when we seek to use our words in those ways, we will indeed also find ourselves transformed and we will thereby witness to a society that sometimes seems literally hell-bent on fear and demagoguery and violence that there is a better way, there is a better way. Thanks be to God, there is a better way.