

Acts 9:36-43

The Healing Community

You probably know I have been thinking about trees more lately. I'll try really hard to make this the last sermon I talk about the old Cottonwood tree. :) It has been interesting how a tree in a small community can be a source of memories of beauty, landmark, comfort. Our huge tree that had to come down was just always there people told us. They would walk home from school or go to the corner store that used to be at 24th and Main and there she was standing tall with her wide arms.

And now she is gone and people have grieved, including us. I have wondered who else missed the cottonwood. The racoon that we realized was in the tree probably misses the top half of its home. We didn't know it was there until it took off during the trunk cutting. It still pops its head out in the bottom stump that is left.

I wonder if the other trees notice they have lost one of their own?

I find it fascinating that scientists have discovered that trees communicate with each other. According to Peter Wohlleben, a German forester and author of *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*, trees have a kind of network. "Some are calling it the 'wood-wide web,'" Peter says.

"All the trees, in every forest that isn't too damaged, are connected to each other through underground fungal networks. Trees share water and nutrients through the networks, and also use them to communicate to help keep each other alive. They send distress signals about drought and disease or insect attacks, and other trees alter their behavior when they receive these messages."

"A study shows that trees know the taste of deer saliva. When a deer is biting a branch, the tree brings defending chemicals to make the leaves taste bad. When a human breaks the branch with their hands, the tree knows the difference, and brings in substances to heal the wound."

And trees seem to grieve in their own way. Wohlleben has come across a huge beech stump in a forest near his home in Germany, a tree that was felled 500 years ago, and if you look closely the stump is still

green with chlorophyll. The surrounding beech trees were keeping it alive by pumping sugar to it through the network. Maybe they just couldn't or weren't ready to let the matriarch tree fully leave them.¹

And you might know where this is headed. The faith community in Acts in our scripture today is in grief. There has been a death. Tabitha, (her Greek name was Dorcas) had died suddenly and Peter had been summoned to do what, it doesn't say, but I imagine, "Please come and help us," was the request.

The meaning of Tabitha's name gives her away. Gazelle. Graceful Gazelle. They are the people who don't have to talk about themselves. They actually know what your needs are, maybe because they asked you or if you are too distraught to know what you need, they drop a package on your doorstep or show up with friends to mow your lawn. They are those people who give without strings attached. They naturally know how to be a bridge, seeing people as part of community and community means everyone to them.

I remember hearing a conversation a while ago, where someone was describing how painful it was to not be included in a certain group. They felt intentionally left out. It felt like a clique which by definition is (a small group of people, with shared interests or other features in common, who spend time together and do not readily allow others to join them.) Some synonyms are fraternity or in-crowd. We all know this word and may have experienced this too. Someone new to this country added to the conversation and said, "We don't have that word in our language. There is no such concept of a clique," they said. "Everyone is always included." How refreshing! I can hardly imagine that.

Tabitha was not afraid to take risks. She stepped out of her prescribed societal role and began a sewing enterprise/collective and we probably wouldn't know she was the owner or the entrepreneur. She included others and worked with them, alongside them. She was spiritually mature which includes humbleness using her individual power for others.

The community had felt her presence and benefitted from her gifts.

It isn't hard to believe that Tabitha's friends were keeping vigil after she suddenly became ill and died. They were holding and wearing the clothes they had made with her and they were in deep grief and mourning.

Her presence, what she meant to people, her very essence of being rooted in the love and transformation of Christ became larger than life. Worship was a way of living and it spoke volumes.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/the-whispering-trees-180968084/>

This story of mourning and grief becomes a resuscitation story when Peter said, “Tabitha, get up,” and she opened her eyes and sat up.

Would we have thought of sending for Peter? Tabitha’s friends might have heard less than 15 miles down the road in Lydda Peter had just healed a man who had been bedridden for years. That’s plausible. There also seems to be in the accounts in Acts of miracles and the people embodying the way of Jesus that there was a collective mantra of, “We don’t know how everything works but God does so let’s send for Peter and see what happens. Strange things have been happening lately.”

Was it because the resurrection of Christ hadn’t been that long ago that they were able to have the eyes of possibility? They seemed to be able to let go of what they knew about life and death and actually hope for the possibility that didn’t line up or make sense with the norm.

And if Tabitha hadn’t risen from the dead, if Peter came out of the room and said, “I’m so sorry. There wasn’t anything more I could do,” I’m guessing the friends would still have been wonder people and said, “We still don’t know how everything works and our hope is in God. We can be here for each other and let’s find some food for Peter and tell our stories of Tabitha.” Do you hear that? There is an embedded (collective) humility and hope in the stories of Acts of a new faith that brings cohesiveness to the community.

An aspect of this healing community is that it expects hope to show up in surprising ways.

This is the first recorded raising of the dead by someone other than Jesus. It seems the power to do miracles was given to more than Jesus. The spirit Jesus left his followers was used for others. Power that is given for the good of the community.

It also is the time we see the word disciple used for a woman. Verse 36 says, “Now there was at Joppa, a certain disciple named Tabitha.” This is the first and only use of the feminine form of the Greek word for disciple in the New Testament. (mathaytria). Thank you, Luke, the author, for being brave in the culture then and giving credit to a woman being a disciple.

If you read more in Acts, common fishermen are preaching to the educated in the temple. Saul, a man who terrorized followers of Jesus has a conversion experience and becomes one of them, a paralyzed man gets out of his bed and walks, and a woman named Gazelle has a start-up that benefits those at the bottom of the social ladder, like she was and provides and works with them in meaningful work.

Another characteristic then of this healing community is that no one stays in their place. When the Spirit of the risen Lord is on the loose, and we get in tune with it, a community can't help but be free to try new things and be a faith community that makes decisions that help people grow and be transformed, help people discover gifts and they then bless others by using them in whatever way they can. In that community there is healing and hope. It's contagious.

And when no one stays in their place that means we take risks.

If we are an Anabaptist grounded faith community how might we take risks in living out key Anabaptist faith values?

We could start with community. Community is at the center of our faith. We walk with each other in life's journey. Community means we belong somewhere. We are welcome and accepted.

- Taking a risk with the value of community might be making it very clear everyone is welcome here. People we don't know yet. How would that be known?
- In community, we know each other. Taking a risk might be knowing each other even when things aren't going well. Being vulnerable. Sharing our pain and struggles as well as our joys. Holding each other accountable to live well together.
- In community there may be times we need to have hard conversations. When we do, we are saying my relationship with you is worth it. It may be awkward. We may disagree *and* we are committed to seeing it through. We will not turn our back on each other. We will talk until we understand each other and still we may not be on the same page.

Another Anabaptist core value is following Jesus and how Jesus showed us to live. Jesus is the center of our faith.² We weigh what Jesus said and how Jesus lived as most important.

- Jesus showed us risk in not staying in his prescribed place when he talked to women, nonJewish people, healing on the Sabbath, taking time for children. Having Jesus step out of bounds and use his power for others helped people see something new in themselves.. We recognize our power we each have and we use our power so it benefits everyone. We cheer for others. Jesus showed this by healing and teaching and then saying go and get out there. Go make some mistakes. Use your gifts! Take a risk and keep learning. Open the box up you are staying in. The diaspora happened because of persecution and many other places heard the Good News and we don't need

² <https://www.mennonitemission.net/Downloads/DL.MissioDei18.E.pdf>

to wait for persecution to take risks. We are courageous people. When we follow Jesus, we will be taking risks.

As an Anabaptist community we are committed to living out another core value of peace and reconciliation in the everyday and in times of conflict/war.

- Conflict big or on a small scale is a part of life and relationships. The new faith community in Acts 6 had a conflict. The Hellenist widows, the Jews who spoke Greek and were of a Greek culture said they were being overlooked. More food was being given to the Cradle Jew widows if you know what I mean. This conflict was brought to the leaders, the 12 and it says in Acts 6: 2 that they brought together the whole community to discern what to do and who to appoint. They appointed 7 men who were Hellenists to make sure the widows got what they needed. This is a creative approach to sharing power, giving power away to new people and more than one person is making the decision together. The only thing they could have done better is to make it a team of women and men. Ask some of the widows who were being overlooked to be leaders. They know what is needed.
- A risk to take in living out peace and reconciliation is learning and practicing how to talk about difficult issues and conversations with respect and integrity and this shows hope for the future. It shows children how to be adults when times get tough. Instead of withdrawing and being silent or talking in small circles, we can as a faith community show we care so much about each other that we will do the hard work of learning to listen and dialogue with each other and stay in relationship.

I look around the world and even in our own denomination and I see people giving up on each other more and more, willing to leave relationships instead of working at it. It takes the whole community to heal and have hope.

There was a congregation Robert and I pastored together in a transition time and they had a really tough decision ahead of them and it involved belief and specific issues and in their process they didn't turn from each other even having very different beliefs on being inclusive to all. It's often said that we want to stay together in spite of our differences and in this church for them it was true for them that they wanted to stay together period and they did. They were deciding whether to stay in a conference that had become very open and affirming to the LGBTQ community and celebrated the ordination and gifts of pastors who were gay. They were choosing between different conferences that were presented to them over this transition time and in the end some people told me they chose a conference they thought others would be

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more comfortable with than their own convictions because they wanted to stay together. Even in doing that the vote came out to remain in the conference they were in, which was a more progressive stance. So it must have been that those who held a more traditional view voted in a way that they thought others would want instead of their first choice. The bottom line was they all wanted to be together. No divisions.

It makes me wonder about heaven? Do you think we'll be the only ones there because we're the ones that are right?

I wonder what will remain when it is all over. Will it be belief? Will it be being right? If those are what is most important I think Jesus would have gotten out of being put on a cross.

From I Corinthians 13 , “And now faith, hope, and love remain, these three, and the greatest of these is love.”

Those who belonged to The Way, the new community (Acts 9:2) became known as the people who turned the world upside down. (Acts 17:6)

A community that has hope and healing. A community that takes risks.

From the story of Tabitha we see that many believed.

The healing community heals more than itself.

May we be a faith community that is known for love. A love that takes risks for people. A love that hopes. A love that is committed through it all.

A love that will heal us all.

Amen