

REDISCOVER JESUS: DEVOTED TO ...

Acts 9:36-42

Intro

Stewardship Sunday: the bane of so many preachers and worship leaders.

Why?

Very simply: talking about (and I suppose for that matter listening to someone talk about) money (even in an oblique fashion) can feel like a third rail of church life...aka: don't touch it unless you want an awful shock.

You combine that with the fact that we have embarked on a congregational endeavor to 'Rediscover Jesus' (through our daily Lenten readings and our worship services as well), and I thought to myself as I sat down to write this sermon, 'I don't wanna!!', partially because it felt like we were stepping out of the momentum that God was starting to create, but also because I know that there are more than a few people who view a sermon of stewardship like they would nasty tasting cough syrup: 'fine, I'll take it...but I'm not going to like it!'

And then I thought about the line that I kept being led back to last week (are you feeling uncomfortable?), and what came to mind was, 'well, Ryan, get over it. If it's of God, then it should be heard.'

So, welcome to a sermon about stewardship!

Our opening passage introduces us to a person of the early church. Her name is Tabitha (or Dorcas, depending on the language of the day that you were more comfortable with). Tabitha dies and what happens is, absolutely, miraculous.

The question that I have is this, why did the other members of the community of faith (who in our passage are referred to as 'disciples'), why did they take the action steps that they did? What was it about Tabitha that affected them so? The scripture reads this way.

Acts 9:36-42

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 (acts of generosity).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.

Matthew 6:19-21

Intro

Our second passage is one that we will be reading in our daily devotional in a few days (yes, that's right: a message on stewardship and the path to rediscover Jesus are able to complement each other...how radical! (do you see what I did there?)).

As I kept thinking about these words and the examples that are connected, what kept running through my head was this: what are you devoted to? Because whatever you are devoted to...there your heart will be as well. The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 6:19-21

19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

'Rediscover Jesus: Devoted to...'

Devoted.

Think about the word devoted.

Think about it this way: what are you devoted to? What draws your attention and your interest; your time and your talent? What are you devoted to?

Where does the church, and much more importantly God, rank in the check-down list of things that you are devoted to?

Devoted is defined as, 'very loving or loyal'. What are you, 'very loving or loyal' toward?

And this is not asked from a place of judgement. This is not about making you feel guilty or making you feel that you have fallen short.

It's asked from a place of making an honest assessment.

What and/or who are you devoted to?

Because how you answer that question begins to speak toward the existence, the life, that you have created or, at the very least, have claimed ownership of.

What and/or who are you devoted to?

How would the people who know you best answer that same question about you?

The reason that I push us in that *slightly* different direction is because of the passage that our stewardship materials for this year are built around. It is in these materials that we have the tagline: devoted to good works and acts of charity. But while it's a good tagline, that's really not what that story was about. That story is about Tabitha and the impact that she left upon the people whom she was connected with. We know next to nothing about Tabitha. We don't know if Tabitha was young or old, married or single, rich or poor. We know none of it. She is not mentioned before these verses and she is not mentioned after...but clearly her name carried gravitas (yes, I'm using the word gravitas like a political commentator of the 2000 presidential election). If her name did not carry the presence that it did, then Luke (the presumed author of Acts) wouldn't have given us her name: she would have been referred to as 'a believer'.

But her name did carry weight.

Why?

Because of what she was devoted to. Her devotion manifested itself in her care for those who were struggling to meet their everyday needs in her community: she made clothes; she made garments; she made coverings for the people who couldn't do it themselves...for whatever reason. This is what she was devoted to, whom she was lovingly loyal toward. She had been blessed by God with those skills, those abilities, those interests and she used them in a radically generous way.

She impacted the people around her...so much so that when she died her friends, her fellow church members as it were, thought, almost immediately, 'we should see if Peter would come and maybe, just maybe, the miraculous thing that we are hoping for, might come to pass.'

Her devotion impacted those around her.

Which leads us into the second passage, and since it's short enough, you get to hear it a second time! Matthew 6:19-21: 19 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

As we started talking about last Sunday, Jesus calls for us to take on a radical form of generosity. Jesus wants for us to become the most generous person in our sphere of influence.

Which means, that we necessarily need to work on our attitudes toward money, things, and people. Because we are being called to take on Jesus' priorities and live out Gospel values, and the reality is, that way more times than not...our devotions and those priorities and values do not weave together all that well.

This doesn't mean that they are in opposition to each other.

Rather, that they do not speak through each other to the point that one becomes indistinguishable from the other.

It did for Tabitha.

It can for you as well...when we are willing to walk with Jesus. It will be then that the things that we are devoted to are able to become the vehicles through which the light of Jesus is able to shine, or we are able to look at our lives through a more God-directed prism that shows us that the things that we are currently devoted to...shouldn't be! That doesn't mean that those things are removed from your life, but instead that they take up a more appropriate rung on the ladder of importance.

Look, stewardship is not about money. It can be...but it doesn't have to be.

No, stewardship is about devotion. 'Where your treasure is, there your heart will be as well'.

What are you devoted to? That, at the very least points to, if not out and out declares, what your treasure is.

And that's where your heart is as well.

That's why when the stewardship and finance commission invites us to consider taking a 'step up' that one of the reactions that is heard is, 'here's the church trying to take more of my money.'

When that sort of a statement is made, what carries more devotion: God or money?

Because the reality is that for many folks, the answer to taking a step up is, 'no, I can't.' And that's a wonderfully appropriate answer when it is given out of a place of devotion to God.

It's when the answer is, 'no, I won't' because the devotion to how you want to use that financial resource is taking precedence over the devotion that we are supposed to have for God, it's then that things are out of order.

Jesus calls for us to walk with him in ways that may feel radical in regard to money, things, and people. But when our devotion rests in Jesus that whole radical thing starts to fade away because it's not radical...it's right...because it's of God, because it is God.

So here's your stewardship message: what are you devoted to? Because that's where your heart currently abides. Jesus invites you to be devoted to him. Are you going to knock on that door? When you do, then you will find yourselves in the company of people like Tabitha, whose devotion to Jesus manifested itself in a passion for people that affected them through every season of life.

Be a radical: be devoted...to Jesus. Once you are...that whole stewardship idea seems to not be so radical anymore!

After Sermon Prayer

Holy and gracious God, as we ponder the question of what we are devoted to, we have to admit that there are too many days in too many ways when our devotions are not aligned with You. Lord, work in us and free us from the fears and desires that pull at us in every which way, so that we might begin to walk anew with Your son. God, we want to be devoted to You...radically. Lord, hear our prayer, and let it be so. Amen.