The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Grace and Works: They Go Together

Acts 9:36-43

Revelation 7:9-17

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I give thanks for the fine partnership between House of Hope and United over the years. Your generous scholarship funds have assisted students in preparing for their vocations. I give thanks for your vision and care for theological education.

Have you considered what you want on your tombstone? The husband of a close friend said she would have these words, “I am fine, really!” Mine will probably be inscribed with a limerick:

Here lies the theologian named Molly T.,

That she had many opinions, you will agree,

She gave seminaries her best

And now finally finds rest

Preparing to debate what faith can now see.

What is said of us at the time of our death reflects how we have lived. The seer of the Apocalypse offers these words:

Then a voice from heaven said, “Write this down: Happy are those who die in Our God for all eternity.”

“Yes,” says the Spirit, “let them rest from their work for their deeds accompany them” (Revelation 14:13).

As we progress in Eastertide, the lectionary text in Acts suggests a close alignment of grace and works. In the story of Tabitha (Dorcas in Greek), her good works are on display. She was “always doing good and helping the poor” (9:36b). Generous in all her ways, she had gathered a circle of widows who benefited from her ministry. Her deeds accompanied her.

When she died unexpectedly, her friends sent for Peter who was in the vicinity, not far from Joppa. Peter responded quickly, and I think his healing ministry with Tabitha prepared him for a further remarkable spiritual experience in Joppa, which prompted a much larger vision of the extent of God’s work with Gentiles, whom God did not consider unclean. You recall that Peter had struggled with inclusion, especially when it came to sharing meals with others than Jews. Tabitha most likely had Greek as well as Jewish women in the circle of widows—hence the dual notation of her name.

Tabitha carries a unique title; her designation is “woman disciple” (*mathetria*), used only here in the New Testament. Obviously, she had quite a following! In the Spirit and power of the Risen Christ, Peter bids her to arise. Luke uses the same verb (*anistemi*) that describes the resurrection of Jesus. The resuscitation of Tabitha has similarity to the miracle of overcoming death in other stories in the Gospel of Luke, and she returns to her life through the restoring power Peter offers in the name of Jesus.

Peter presents her alive to all the widows, those who had been so influenced by her faithful service. She now becomes the inspiration for the conversion of many, and they believe in the Lord because of this mighty act. In these early days following the resurrection of Jesus, Acts demonstrates the many ways his disciples follow his pattern of healing

I find the accent on her many good works interesting. Protestants have been quite fearful of compromising the power of grace with any concomitant emphasis on works. Yet, the story of Tabitha makes her concrete labor for others the centerpiece of her life, lost and then restored. There is no perception that she is raised because of a simple calculus that this is what she deserves, yet her generative ministry surely expresses resurrection power.

God’s compassion on the bereaved widows is also an essential part of this narrative. Restoring her to this community expresses the power of resurrection that is set loose in the world. Resurrection is never just about Jesus or strictly past tense. Resurrection always manifests a new mode of being as life eternal has broken into the present.

A few short years ago I traveled to Chiang Mai, Thailand, for a global immersion pilgrimage with students, where we visited a Karen Bible College. In addition to the classrooms and library, there was also Tabitha’s Shop, aptly named, full of beautiful fabric creations. Following the example of their biblical forebear, these contemporary Christian disciples sew to support varied ministries. Not only do they keep tribal crafts from becoming extinct, they also find ways to support their extended families. And our group did our best to stimulate their economy!

Grace inspires good works, and these expressions of liberation demonstrate the power of God’s redemptive power. Indeed, people are much more likely to believe in resurrection when the people of God practice merciful initiatives toward others.

Good works are the fitting response to God’s lavish grace. They do not save us, but it is hard to perceive that we are being redeemed if our lives do not exhibit the impulse for “always doing good and helping the poor.”

The text from Revelation speaks further of a legacy of grace and works. Gathered from every nation, the great multitude is clothed in white, and they hold Palm branches—portraying both the festal entry and the triumph of resurrection.

Of interest is the very striking image of washing robes in blood to make them white. It is an active statement, speaking of the participation of these who washed rather than “being washed.” The same faithful witness of Jesus can be the vocation of others, too, as Christopher Rowland writes.[[1]](#footnote-1) Saving work, the appropriate response to grace, is to be shared, and God invites humans to participate in God’s own mission. God does not choose to do it without us! What we have forgotten is that Jesus represents us but does not displace our responsibility.

This vision is not for the squeamish. This multitude has come through a “great ordeal.” It sounds much like what the people of Ukraine are enduring. Much blood is on the ground there, and Christians are hardly exempt from suffering. Knowing that Jesus has endured the worst humanity can deliver and ultimately triumphed grants hope in the midst of human suffering, even when tempted to despair.

They sing the great Hosanna, as we do during times of duress. It means come and liberate us. Yet, passivity did not allow them to join this vision of ultimate victory. It is a joint venture between divine and beloved humanity.

One of my little rituals as president of a seminary is to remind students that “salvation is by grace, but graduation is by works.” (There is usually a bit of grace thrown in . . .)

God has granted us the power to extend our hands and bring back to life those left for dead because of the exigent circumstances of their lives. We can embody resurrection and call persons to new life; such is the power entrusted to us by God.

I trust that in addition to theological feistiness, some might remember me for concrete acts of justice and mercy. What will those gathered after you depart say of you? Hopefully it will be, “their deeds accompany them.” Such is the witness of those given new life through the power of the Risen Christ.

1. Christopher C. Rowland, “The Book of Revelation,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible,* Vol. XII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)