

Reflection for Sunday, May 8, 2022

The Maternal Face of God

Each part of creation reveals unique aspects of God the Creator, who is both in creation and beyond it. All parts of creation, animate and inanimate, are related. All creation is good. We sing of the Creator, who made humans to live and move and have their being in God. In and with God, we can direct our lives toward right relationship with each other and with God. We can discover our place as one strand in the web of life. We can grow in wisdom and compassion. We can recognize all people as kin. We can accept our mortality and finitude, not as a curse, but as a challenge to make our lives and choices matter.

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands, and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices; who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

The Risen Christ lives today, present to us and the source of our hope.

Let us pray:

Jesus, sweet Lord, are you not also a mother? Truly you are a mother, the mother of all mothers, who tasted death in order to give life to all your children. Dear God, it's because you are there when we turn to you, that we dare embrace life. It's because you believe in us that we can freely accept the gift of life. It's because you love the world that we can take it to our hearts. Gracious God, it's all because of you that our hearts can sing. Turn loose our praise. Amen.

I can't think of a more compelling story for Mother's Day than the story of Tabitha—the consummate caregiver and the high regard and deep affection felt by the church. But the story begins on a very jarring note. Tabitha has died.

We are told little about Tabitha (her name means gazelle and in Greek is Dorcas) while she is living and little more when she dies. She is a saintly soul known for her compassion but much more than that; she also bears the distinction of being the only person in the New Testament specifically designated as a female disciple. A disciple, for Luke, is a person, male *or* female, who follows Jesus into a life of healing, reconciliation, confrontation with those holding religious and political power, and love.

The character of Tabitha's discipleship is one of provision and compassion, tending to the needs of the neediest around her. Her compassion probably was demonstrated most often through her garment making. Tabitha's life and death impacted the community so greatly that they asked the apostle Peter to come witness what she had done, and they showed him the garments she stitched, which suggests that Tabitha had given many of these garments to those in need. She knew and cared about those who received her handmade garments, and that is why they grieve so for her loss. She attended to the physical and financial needs of many, especially the needs of widows, easily among the most vulnerable citizens of her society. She provided security to those whose status in life rendered them insecure. Tabitha uses her privileges not to her own advantage but on behalf of those who have none: widows, the poor, the outcast. No doubt her death not only elicited their sorrow, but also heightened their sense of insecurity. At first glance, Peter may seem the headliner in this story, the disciple who is summoned and then comes to the rescue of a saintly woman who has died. But the true headliner is God, who uses Peter to restore Tabitha to life. The rising of Tabitha brings with it not only the rising of hope of those most downcast in her community, but the rising of hope for anyone in any time who has been isolated, alienated, beaten down, cast out by life or society or family. The rising of Tabitha is a beacon of hope even today for those who are neglected or abused by the most powerful in society. New life in Christ means renewed hope for those deemed by society as hopeless.

This is a story located in the Easter cycle of the church, not simply because death is defied and God's will for life prevails, but because Tabitha rises and her Easter life leads disciples—female and male—to attend to the ones who are most often neglected or forgotten by society, but never forgotten by God. When Peter raises Tabitha from death, he is demonstrating the resurrection hope of a transformed community. *"The Risen Christ lives today, present to us and the source of our hope."* Tabitha was a disciple, a follower of Jesus, because she imitated him in love and service to others. Peter couldn't help but imitate what he'd seen Jesus do—as he fulfills his new vocation as the good shepherd of the church.

Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian theologian, reflects on divine consolation in times of abandonment. He writes: "The human condition is made up of fears and hopes, of helplessness and the search for consolation. We are at the mercy of forces and situations beyond our control. Fear nullifies the joy of life, hinders freedom, and clouds the future. Who knows a spiritual route that can enable us to transcend this situation and open us to the prospect of divine protection? We are called to trust in a Greater One, who is infinitely good, who knows us by name, who knows the secrets of our hearts, and who is the true master of our life's fate." Easter will surely not completely relieve us of fear, but it will give us strength to confront it; it will nourish our capacity for trust and bring us back the serenity needed to continue on our personal and group adventure on this tiny planet, the common house we share. God has deigned to make it God's house, and to make us guests and table companions of the Lord. Think of the image of the multitude in Revelation, "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the Lamb." If God is with us, we have everything, and we "shall not want."

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