

An Astonishing Imitation

Part 3 of Sermon Series:
Surprise! The Unexpected Acts of God

a sermon based on

Acts 9:36-43

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You've probably heard the saying that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." Is it? I've known people who've gotten upset – angry even – because someone else "copied" them; and not in a malicious way like brothers and sisters do when they whine, "He's copying me."

Celebrities on the other hand, get richer on the presumption that others will want to imitate them. Models and actresses with no expertise in chemistry or dermatology – have infomercials touting the benefits of their special line of makeup or skin care. Why? Use this and you'll look as good as me. Right?

Athletes receive multi-million dollar endorsement contracts from shoe companies. Why? Because if you buy these shoes, you really can be like Mike (Michael Jordan) and plant that slam dunk jumping from the free throw line. My first baseball bat was "signed" by Ernie Banks. Why am I not a Hall of Famer, with my number flying above Wrigley Field?

I don't think that most of us really believe that you will end up looking like Cindy Crawford because you use her make-up line. I don't think that we believe that wearing Air Jordan footwear will magically transform us into some sort of basketball superstar. I could go on, but I won't. You get the point.

Those models and athletes are stars largely because of some inherent traits that you or I just don't share. But at the same time, they've also done those things that help them to make the most out of those traits. Maybe we can learn from that. Michael Jordan practiced and uses the best equipment available. Cindy Crawford eats a healthy diet and exercises, and uses products that are good for her skin. Maybe there is something to imitation.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:6-9, Paul writes,

"Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate."

Although he takes a sort of negative approach, he makes the argument for choosing whom to imitate. In particular, he implores the church to imitate those who are busy for the sake of the gospel.

In the passage from Acts that we heard from earlier, we hear how Peter imitated Jesus. Tabitha had died. Peter follows Jesus' example, he tells everyone to leave the room and then – alone with the dead woman – he says, "Tabitha, get up." (Acts 9:40) Even more fascinating when we remember that when Jesus went into the room where the leader of the local synagogues' daughter lay dead that he said, "Talitha cum (Little girl, get up)" (Mk 5:41) *Talitha* sounds an awful like *Tabitha*. Peter didn't just imitate what Jesus did, sending the others out of the room, but he used the same simple command, "You, get up!" He didn't give some long eloquent prayer. He just did what Jesus did. And guess what? She got up.

So are you all ready to go out and imitate Jesus? Except that I don't think that's exactly what God has in mind for us – to tell every dead body to "get up!" Even Jesus only did it three times: for that little girl (Mk 5:41), the widow's son (Lk 7:12) and Lazarus (Jn 11:43). Imitating Jesus is hard. At least, it is if we only think about the miracles performed by the Son of God.

What do we do with the command that Paul gave to imitate the saints? You see, there's someone else in this story not only worthy of imitation, but who shows what it is to imitate Jesus. Her name is Tabitha. Think about this. We know her name. We don't know name of the little girl or the widow's son whom Jesus raised; but we do know this woman's name. There must be a reason for that. It's a basic principle of reading Scripture, that when we hear a name that there must be a reason instead of just "a woman or a man". Sometimes it's because the community of faith would be familiar with the person and it helped to drive home what God in Jesus Christ was

doing in their midst. Other times there's something significant about the name. St. John Chrysostom in his *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 21* suggests that it's the meaning of the name Tabitha (in Hebrew) or Dorcas (in Greek) which means gazelle. As he notes gazelles are always active and always alert never resting.¹

When Peter comes to the house because he was close by, what do we hear? The widows were grieving showing Peter and the disciples all that this disciple, Tabitha, had done (the clothes that she had made for them). Here comes the Mothers Day twist. Tabitha like the young man whom Jesus raised had been caring for the widows. But it would have been different for her. Widows would have been cared for by their children, unless they were childless. Then they would have returned to their parents homes to be cared for. Likewise, often when Jesus spoke about those needing to be looked after he said "widows and orphans." These widows mourned for this woman who looked after them as a mother. Even though, she may or may not have been younger than them. Think about that.

Yes, Peter imitated Jesus and a miracle happened. But Tabitha imitated Jesus' call to tend to "the least of these" and was recognized as a disciple (the only woman in Scripture who received that designation directly).

I don't doubt that the widows who gathered grieved because they loved Tabitha; but I also wonder whether they also wondered, "What now?" Pity parties are nothing new in the church. We remember the good ole' days; or we fret that there aren't many young people; or the church budget is out of wack. Maybe we grieve the loss of a spiritual guide whether it be a beloved pastor who moved on or a friend or relative who has died. "What now?" We ask.

But the answer is here. Peter dared to tell Tabitha to get up, because he'd witnessed the resurrection. Peter dared to imitate Jesus in the most daring way, because he trusted him, and wanted to bless this community of widows. Even though raising the dead is a big deal, notice that he didn't make a spectacle. He went into her alone. It was only after Tabitha came out of that room and the others started to tell what had happened that they came to believe.

Tabitha had a place in that. She was always busy for the Lord. Always looking for ways to be a disciple – a follower who did what Jesus commanded.

That's the opportunity that we have, today. You may not be called to be God's agent for miracles or even a miracle. Although, on Mothers Day, we can't escape the miracle of birthing a child. You may not be called to be famous as a disciple; but you are called to be a disciple. That is each of us can follow Jesus example to – as I noted last week – invite others (even perceived adversaries) into fellowship and to treat them with respect, to care for those in need, and to speak up for justice and righteousness, to follow the admonition of Micah 6:8 to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with the LORD. That's what Jesus did.

When we imitate his example, we give birth to hope in the world, and in those simple acts might even inspire others to imitate us so that they too might come to faith in Jesus Christ.
AMEN.

¹ Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, 14 vols. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 2004) 138.