

Reclaiming and Inclusive Church – Part 3 – We’ve Got New Legs!
Acts 9:36-43
April 29, 2007

Lieutenant Dan was the consummate soldier. Third generation soldier at that. Dad was an officer in World War II. Granddad a hero of the First World War. Dan’s unit was looking for Vietcong deep within the jungles of South Vietnam. A vicious firefight ensued that afternoon and Dan’s legs were broken like toothpicks by a mortar blast. As he shouted on his radio for air backup his men began to drop like flies. But the hero of that firefight was not Lieutenant Dan. It was Forest Gump. Forest carried off friend after friend to safety. Finally, despite the protests of Dan who wanted to stay behind with his fallen men, Forest carried him off to safety just as the U.S. planes dropped napalm across the now burning jungle. Lieutenant Dan lived. But he lost both legs. In later scenes of the epic movie *Forest Gump* Dan shout and curse at Forest, at God, at anyone who would listen that it wasn’t supposed to have ended that way. He was to have stayed with his men serving them even as they died. It was a tortured twist from a laughing God that he should survive and suffer the final insult of losing his legs and his now his soul. But Dan has his dark night of the soul and begins to gain hope. He finds a new vocation as a Shrimp Boat captain on Forest’s growing fleet of Shrimp boats. Finally, in one of the last scenes of the movie, as Forest prepares to marry his childhood sweetheart Jenny, Lieutenant Dan strolls up to the wedding, dressed in a new suit, with his own fiancée on his arm. Forest rushes up to Dan, shouting, “Lieutenant Dan, you’ve got new legs! New legs.” Lieutenant Dan lifts his pant leg to reveal titanium alloy artificial legs. “magic legs...Dan has magic legs!”

Healing is a miraculous thing to watch even when it is not miraculous.

Several months ago I began to volunteer weekly at the Bering Omega Care Center. On Tuesdays I started playing silly games like “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” I was having a great time, but they asked me a couple of weeks ago if I would offer a weekly Bible Study instead. I said “yes” and asked the clients what they would like to study. Their number one answer was “healing in the Bible.” So we looked at several healing stories of the Hebrew and Christian Testaments. At the end of our session I asked them if they had healing stories that they would like to share. One woman started to share his story. She had lapsed into a coma for several days. The doctors were preparing for her death. Her pastor came daily to pray at her bedside. Suddenly, after a few days, she awoke from her coma and started to get up and walk. She got new legs! She then said and her fellow clients agreed that she had never been healed by any doctors and was very skeptical of them. Instead, she only had confidence in God’s healing power. I was awed and humbled by her steadfast faith. She asked me if I had the gift of healing and I said, “no.” It got me to thinking as we gather in worship, and as we look at this text, what is the relationship between healing, and worship and ministry (which literally means service)? My focus today as we look at this passage in Acts, and as we continue to explore how we can reclaim our heritage as an inclusive church, is that one of the keys to our understanding is in how we understand Christian service. For it is *in service that we become awed by God and what God can do in the world through us (repeat this).*

Our text from Acts and the resuscitation of Dorcas speaks to this point in several instances. It also speaks to my theme of this sermon series, *Reclaiming an Inclusive Church*. But first I want to look at a problem in the text as it relates to inclusivity.

To “include” has a number of definitions such as “to consider as a part of something;” also it means to admit or to allow participation in or the right to be part of; Finally it means to permit to exercise the rights, functions, and responsibilities of a group. This is probably a definition that means the most to us. To “exclude” is to prevent from being included or considered or accepted. Exclude can also mean to expel or cast out. That is exactly the Greek word, *Ekballo*, which Luke uses to describe what Peter did to the widows and others in the crowd that greeted him in Joppa begging him to revive the dead saint Dorcas. He excludes them, meaning casts them out, as he prays over the body of Dorcas. What’s going on with that? Maybe he’s not sure this resuscitation is really going to work and he doesn’t want to be embarrassed? Maybe he wants to inflate himself somehow? I don’t think it is either of those things. I think Peter wants to be completely focused on the healing power of God working through him. Notice that he invites them back in right after that.

The focus of my message in this text today is in the character of Dorcas. Dorcas is described as a disciple who was tireless in her kind acts of service and in her giving to charity. The early church was primarily made up of poor people. And those who were at the bottom of society were widows. There was no social security system or safety net. The Christian community provided through their network of gifts and acts of charity the safety net, especially for dependent people like widows. Gathered around Dorcas were those women wearing the clothing that she had made that might have been the only outfit that they had. What a beautiful image! Dorcas’ death was not only a personal loss to these women but also an economic loss to all those that she supported through her acts of charity. So here they surround this woman in love as she is prepared for burial for later

in the day. No wonder that the messengers were so urgent in their message to Peter to come and resuscitate this person who was so important to the welfare of the community in Joppa.

In my imaginings Dorcas' life and witness represents a beautiful symmetry between service, worship and healing. No you may say I get the connection between service and healing, but how about worship? What do we do in Sunday worship? We pray, we sing, we affirm our faith together, we read the Word and listen to reflections upon that Word. We share in the Eucharist. And then we go home. We don't do anything that looks like service. In fact "worship service" is kind of an oxymoron when you think about it. We are here to glorify and praise God, right? And we do it as a community of faith. Service if you think about is what we do before and after worship. Worship fills us up so that we can go out into the world in the name of Jesus Christ doing acts of service. In fact if we aren't all about service during the week, we are only about Sunday worship. Our time together becomes nothing but a feeding frenzy. Dorcas is a great image of that for me. So is Mary Parker. Imagine all the people who have furniture and all the accessories of "Second Blessings" because Mary has the heart to do this twice every year. So instead of holding up the clothes that Dorcas has made, maybe we can hold up the lamp that we got at one of the Bering Rummage sales. There's a beautiful ache in your muscles the day after a Saturday work project that the church holds when we gather on Sunday morning for worship. I wouldn't trade that ache for anything. I want a church full of Dorcases... a church full of Mary Parkers. Sorry Mary!

Now I have to confess what delights me like nothing else about church and what brings me down like nothing else. I get absolutely "stoked" by seeing someone grow as a

disciple by the way God transforms them in the acts of service that they get involved in. To see how God can work not only get incredible things done through people, but also how they get conformed to Christ in the process? Hmmmm, there is nothing better to me. But I also must confess that nothing can get me in a funk than to see apathy, to see a lukewarm person who never uses and sees to fulfillment the gifts God has placed in her. It saddens me. It empties me. We have incredible talents and gifts in the people of Bering. We have Dorcases all over the place who are surrounded by other wearing the clothing of love created by you and you and you.

In the years of 1997 and 1998 I had two of my best business years in the Information Technology business. I worked hard and I earned a lot of money. I also was being formed by God as I was being asked to take on more and more responsibility at my church. I was asked to lead the Council on Ministries at St. Lukes UMC. This is the Council that oversees all the ministries of the church. I got to lead a meeting surrounded by that church's Dorcases. They were all around the table with me. I loved it. Some of those meetings went a little late into the night. When things were really active during the year it was not unusual to not get out of those meetings until 9 p.m. or later. I remember so vividly one evening in the spring of 1998. I was headed out to the parking lot just filled with the Spirit by those Dorcases in that Council. I also had a large sales proposal to work on that week. That proposal, if we were awarded the business, was going to make me many thousands of dollars. But I knew as I thought about sitting down to write that proposal, even if I won several weeks later, that I would not feel the happiness or the deep joy that I felt at that moment as I stood in that parking lot deep into the dark night. I

have never felt more sure of the growing call that God put in my gut that at that precise moment.

Have you ever felt that sense of calling? Dorcas knew it. Peter knew it. You can know it too. As Peter was traveling all over Israel performing these healings and all the wonderful acts of service that his Lord had told him he would perform I wonder what he was feeling? I wonder if he reflected on Jesus' first healing that he witnessed from that first chapter reported in his friend Mark's account of the gospel. They were at Peter's mother-in-law's house. She was very sick. Jesus took her hand, just like Peter took the hand of Dorcas, he raised her up, and she found new legs. Just like Dorcas. And do you know what Peter's mother-in-law did next? She rose from her bed, and Mark tells us that she began to serve them all! Worship...healing...service...it all comes together in that one picture in the mind of Peter.

Do you need new legs? Do you need to find a new calling? Are you like Lieutenant Dan who found that there was more to his life than the disappointment of coming home alive with nothing more to do. He found a new calling, a new life, and a new way to serve people around him. You can have that too. You can have it at Bering Memorial UMC. Please pray with me now that God would point you in the way that you should go.