

I remember Helen and Carol.

You don't know Helen and Carol.

I met these two wonderful women at my first call outside of Gettysburg. They were lifelong members of one of the churches I served. They never married, never had children. They only had each other. In many ways that's all they needed.

They were both to of the most giving and caring people you'd ever meet. If you were in a rut, they'd get you out. If you needed help, there they were. If there was someone in need, they found a way to help.

One day, Helen died.

It was a small a farming community. Everyone knew everyone and news, especially bad news, traveled quick. When Helen died people were in shock. Her death sparked a deep sadness. It also revealed her giving spirit.

Every year she'd round up the ladies in the church, and they gathered blankets and bears. Every year these blankets and bears got donated to the local hospital in Gettysburg. Whenever a child came into the ICU or needed comfort, one of those blankets or bears would find a home.

Helen served because she loved it, and it made a difference.

After Helen died her loving and servant heart laid bare in the community. Her impact was undeniable.

No, you didn't know Helen.

Whenever someone dies a hole remains. We have questions, anger, sadness. The looming questions: How do we move forward? How do we continue this person's memory? How do we honor them?

Huh. Come to think of it - you *do* know Helen.

Peter did.

The first lesson comes from the Book of Acts. In the ninth chapter we find a story about a woman named Tabitha, in Greek - Dorcas.

She was a woman of the people. She was someone who protected the lowliest and provided clothing for the poor.

For Tabitha - these lowly people are widows.

In the ancient world, widows, by definition are poor, on the bottom rung of society. They had no one to represent them or to protect them.

And that's exactly what Tabatha did.

Yet one day Tabitha died, and worlds became upended.

After Tabitha died it was custom in their culture to bathe the body and to keep it for three days. This may seem like an odd practice to us but in antiquity burials happened on the third day.

After they took care of the body, Peter got word that he needed to come without delay.

That's what he did.

He gets into town, and he goes to the upstairs room where Tabitha's body lay. In this room he sees widows weeping. He sees widows holding - *clutching* the clothing Tabitha made. It was something of a visual remembrance of her love.

I don't know if you've ever been in that room, that space.

I have.

It is a sacred space.

It is a space that's full of mourning and sadness, yet hope, new life, and remembrance.

That's the room that Peter walked into.

Every now and then you bump into a person who personifies kingdom-living. These are the givers - the *Helen's* of the world.

These are the folks who never did things for brownie points, but because they had a servant heart. These are the type of people who have the words "*do onto others*" ingrained and tattooed on their hearts. These the type of people who will always and

forever think of other people before themselves, even at their own detriment. These are the people who see purpose in giving rather than receiving.

Have you thought of a *Helen*?

Might we define them as - *shepherds*?

In many ways Tabatha was a shepherd. She took care of the lost and the wayward. She kept them safe, gave them agency, and gave them hope.

Of course, we read about a different type of Shepherd today, the *Good Shepherd*.

Jesus.

I'll be the first to admit that Psalm 23 – it is not my favorite, but that's for another time. Even though it is not my favorite - I found myself drawn to the Psalm for whatever reason. This go around there were two words that stood out.

The psalm opens on a note of peace and calm. We're meant to envision green pastures, blue waters, and safe paths along which the sheep are led by the shepherd. But very quickly that mood is shattered. We are told that we will encounter danger - *the darkest valley*.

It's the part of the Psalm where the worried parent covers their child's eyes because they're scared. And rightfully so.

It's almost as if the Psalm is telling us that danger is inevitable. And at a certain level, yeah - it is. We all find ourselves in these places from time to time - sadness, rage, jealousy, addiction, to name a few.

But even when we are in those dark valleys - this Psalm assures us that we need not *fear*.

We're told that there's no reason to fear because of what the shepherd yields.

The *Rod*, and the *Staff*.

The Rod refers to the short wooden club that the shepherd would use for protection against animals or human enemies. The Staff was longer and helped sheep struggling up a difficult path or through whatever darkness and wilderness they must pass.

Why was I drawn to the rod and the staff you ask?

I love the symbolism. In the one hand the Shepherd yields an instrument of protection, and in the other hand one of gathering. I'm drawn to this because *everything* the shepherd does is meant to keep the sheep safe. *Us*.

When I think about how that translates to my life – it is easier to see the rod. The staff is one thing that I've never questioned. I've never questioned that God is guiding me somehow or some way. But the rod - that one's a little more difficult. Maybe that's because there are times where I feel like I should be getting the rod.

Or put differently, there are times where we give ourselves the rod, no? We can beat ourselves down. We think that we deserve X, Y, or Z punishment. Perhaps there are things that we can't allow ourselves to forgive.

When you hear that play in your mind - that's the *law*. There's no grace in that.

You wanna know where we find it?

The end of the 23rd Psalm tells us that mercy and goodness follow us all the days of our lives. I read this not as something that is just present with us – *mercy and goodness*, but something that is actively pursuing us, *chasing* us down. Grace and mercy are never behind but always in front of us, always seeking us out. And the one seeking us out in all times and places is Jesus - freely offering mercy, forgives, and grace.

*Those* of the still waters, *those* are the green pastures.

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This week I heard a story.

It may seem silly, in fact almost unsettlingly relatable.

There was a person who arrived at their home. They decided to put the car in the garage - so that's what they did. After parking - the driver saw a worm out the corner of their eye. It was a worm that for whatever reason got pinned between the floor and the garage door when it closed. The worm wasn't dead it was just stuck. To make matters worse the sun was beating down. A bad situation made worse.

The person could've easily closed the garage door, squished the worm, and left it to its demise. But the worm was in trouble and couldn't get out of the situation.

The person decided to pick up the worm put in the lawn and let it live.

That's what it is to be a shepherd.

We are all like that worm pinned between the garage door and the ground. Being pinned down is akin to what Paul means by "*I do the things that I hate.*" The sun beating down is our sin. It is the thing that shrivels us, causes us to shrink away from our relationship with God. Friends, we're not left to roast in the sun of our sinfulness. Jesus is the one who picks us up and places us in fertile, loving, and grace filled soil.

I tell you what.

That might seem like a rather ordinary story.

Hear this - God is found in the *ordinary*.

God is found in many ordinary people gathered here today. People who whether they know it or not are shepherds. They are people who love and care for others. They are people who know that they are loved wholeheartedly and unceasingly by their Savior. And they are people who act in faith by seeing others as God sees them.

Now we will never be the Good Shepherd, we cannot save ourselves. But because the Good Shepherd *has* saved us, that *allows* us to serve others, be it a worm, a person in deep distress, or by simply hugging a friend.

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Earlier I mentioned that I was forbade from using the 23rd Psalm while I was on internship at the hospital. Here's the thing. Psalm 23 may be popular - over used perhaps, but it has a treasure trove of secrets. One of them rests at the center of the Psalm.

It only works in Hebrew, but here goes.

In front of you, imagine that you have a sheet of paper and the 23rd Psalm is written out in one continuous line. Now take your pen or pencil. Start at the beginning of the Psalm and count in 26 words. Now do the same thing from the end. You've just found the center of the Psalm. You know what's at the center?

In Hebrew - a phrase ... '*for you are with me*'.

Everything we do as Christians, as people is because God is *with* us. God is *with* us when we're not sure about the future. God is *with* us as the Psalm says *in our times of trial*. God is *with* us when we are afraid when we are uncertain of our calling. God is *with* us *always*. And more to the point God is at the *center* of everything.

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Last week I ended my sermon by encouraging you to do a little bit dancing. I think that's what I'm going to encourage you to do again this week.

The story of Tabatha reassures us that death is not the end, that it does not have the final say. Psalm 23 tells us that God is with us always, and that we are forever held in God's hands. I think that deserves some praise and dance.

So, this week go about your lives dancing. Know that God is with you and that because God is with us, we get to serve others.

Amen.