

Give Like Tabitha

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Preaching on:

Acts 9:36–43

As a busy parent with two young boys, I sometimes walk into my messy house and think, Marie Kondo would have a heart attack in here. If you don't know who Kondo is, she's a Japanese tidying guru who helps people with cluttered homes let go of the stuff that doesn't "spark joy" in their lives.

Kondo always starts the tidying process with clothes. Each member of the household has to take every piece of clothing they own and make a pile of it. When she tells people to do this, a lot of them visibly pale or start sweating on camera. And it sometimes takes a long time to make that pile—multiple closets, and chests, and wardrobes, and laundry baskets, and boxes from storage are all emptied out onto one bed.

And usually it's astounding—one person's clothes piled from the bed to the ceiling with lots of little piles falling down onto the floor. Kondo says she does this in order to shock her clients. When you see just how much clothing you really have, you suddenly feel like you don't want that much clothing.

Now they have to go through their piles. They hold each piece of clothing in their hands and look at it to see if it still "sparks joy" in their life. If it doesn't, they get rid of it. If it does, they keep it.

Our clothing piles are so big that it strikes us as a bit strange when the Bible commands us to clothe the naked. Hunger, homelessness, sickness, poverty, imprisonment—they're as much problems in our world as they were in Biblical times, but nakedness is not something we encounter as a problem much in a world that cheaply and disposably produces 80 billion new garment items each year.

But in the time of the Acts of the Apostles, there was not a global industry providing all kinds of cheap clothing to people. Instead, clothing production was mostly done in the household, and it was the highest skill and most labor intensive of the household chores. So, it wasn't cheap.

In Joppa, the widows who were too old or too sick or too poor to make their own clothes had clothes made for them by a Palestinian Christ-following Jewish woman named Tabitha. In Greek she was called Dorcas probably because she interacted with people who spoke both Aramaic and Greek, both Jews and gentiles. We don't know much about Tabitha, but we know how respected, beloved, and important she was in her community. We know she was renowned for her good works and her charity. She was important enough to bring the Apostle Peter to town. She was important enough to be called a "disciple." Tabitha, believe it or not, is the only woman who is specifically called a disciple in the whole New Testament.

We don't know, but we can theorize that she might have been a widow herself, and maybe a woman of some independent means who had the resources to support others. But Tabitha doesn't just donate money, she's a hands-on kind of disciple. She makes the widows in her community clothing with her own hands—a labor-intensive, high-skill, time-consuming process.

She didn't throw her hand-me-downs into a bin at Goodwill the way we might. Tabitha made individual people individual pieces of clothing. To me that's the only explanation for why the women mourning her death are holding onto pieces of clothing that Tabitha made for them. That piece of clothing must have been beautiful and individually tailored and designed to the woman it was given to.

Tabitha's clothes were intimate. She got to know a woman. She got to know her tastes, her style, her needs, her personality. She measured out her body. And then she crafted a garment with love for a woman who probably had very few people who could show her that kind of love and intimacy.

These clothes that these women are showing to Peter are not just shirts and coats. These clothes are Tabitha's love, her good works, her relationships. That's why, when she was gone, the women held onto these pieces of clothing. After she was gone, they continued to "spark joy." After she was gone, the clothes were a testament to her life and love.

As most of you know by now, we are in the midst of our 2024 Stewardship Season, that special time of year when we talk about money and giving to the church, and when we talk about our dreams as disciples and as a church together—what are we giving to, what do we want to achieve with our money in 2024? In order to figure this out we all need to do some real practical planning—budgeting. But I also hope you see it as an opportunity for some deep spiritual reflection.

One of the big lies of our culture is that you can buy your way to happiness. Now, nobody here is a dummy. So, we all know that it doesn't really work that way. And yet I still see it all the time in the world around us. Despite knowing that it's a lie, we're all still enthralled to this mythology. There are some assumptions that underlie this big lie that we might not be aware we still believe in.

For instance, the idea that I am first and foremost a consumer—someone who is primarily oriented to getting something for my money—rather than someone who lives a life of service—someone who is primarily oriented to creating something for others with my money. Or the idea that the most important goal of *my* life is *my* happiness, instead of believing that the most important goal of *our* lives is being here for one another whatever it is that we might be going through—joy or sorrow.

Tabitha didn't buy her way to happiness. She served her way into a life that was bigger than just her. Now, was Tabitha happy? I don't know. I hope so. But she may have lived a very hard life. And no matter what, you can't be happy all the time. It's impossible. But no matter what you're going through, you can live a life that is bigger than just you—and that is the experience that will bring joy and meaning to your life.

The Ministry of Stewardship has issued us all a worthy challenge this year—to increase our giving in 2024 by 20%. That's a big challenge, and I appreciate it. I and my family are able to meet that challenge. We are privileged to be able to increase our pledge by 20%. Some of you will also be able to meet that challenge. Others of you are already giving at the very edge of your budget's ability, and that's very appreciated as well.

The amount of money you give is very important—we live in reality and we need money. However, the amount is less important than the follow-up to the giving. Tabitha gave so that she could serve. So, my challenge to you, as your pastor this year, is whatever amount you're giving, give it with a Tabitha

attitude. Let your pledge spark joy in the lives of others. Your pledge is not part of some hollow transaction, it is a sacred act of love and service. It is a chance to lift up the downtrodden, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry. We give not to fill our own needs, but to meet the needs of everyone among us. We give not to feel good, but to do good. And when we do good, guess what? We feel good!

When we give in this spirit, our lives expand beyond ourselves. We become part of something greater—a community of radical love and transformation. You can't buy radical love. You can't buy transformation. You can only give and serve your way there. So, beloved, give boldly. Give generously. Serve with your whole heart. And know that your offerings will come together to weave us all a whole wardrobe of hope and joy.