

A Churched Life, by Margaret Fulghum Davis, Preached at FPC Athens, Nov. 4, 2018

This year, the church has been focusing on our faith stories. I've been asked me to share with you a story of generosity in the church. These biblical narratives give a helpful glimpse into the generous spirit of the early church passed down by our ancestors in the faith. Rather than focusing on the scholarly details of the text, today, I want us to put ourselves in the biblical disciples' sandals and focus more on the narrative story playing out with the people in the texts, then examining how we may see that reflected in modern church.

First Reading: Luke 5:17-26

Second Reading: Acts 2:42-47; 9:36-43

I don't know about you, but Fall is my favorite season! It's the best time to go visit local farms for the festival atmosphere, isn't it? Pumpkins, hayrides, corn mazes, hot cider, kettle corn! And with the cooler weather, it seems like the entire city is out and about. When I was out at Washington Farms a few weeks ago, I saw this guy proudly wearing a t-shirt that said, "Churched Country Boy!" It struck me. That's not something you see every day, folks celebrating their churched-ness in this secular society, where sadly, church and church folk have not always earned a broadly positive association. I'm not sure I had even heard that phrase before, being "churched."

It made me reflect on what that means to me. How have we been churched? Surely we must have a counter witness to offer secular society about the experience of being churched, or we wouldn't still be here devoting our lives to God through the church. How have we experienced the church and how has the church shaped us? How have we shaped others in the church and how have we shaped the church itself? How has the church shaped society and vice versa? What does scripture say about the earliest forms of people being churched, living lives shaped by the church? Does the same thing happen in today's church?

Our first reading today from the Gospel of Luke looks at the faithful that first gathered around Jesus and how they were being church to one another. Jesus the healer is teaching in a house bursting with people blocking all the entrances and windows. A group of faithful friends are desperate to bring their friend, a paralytic, to Jesus to be healed. Paralytics and all who were differently abled were quite vulnerable, on the margins of that society, dependent upon the generosity of others. The faithful friends are blocked at every turn, but they have dogged determination, ultimately busting through the roof to lower their friend into the midst of everything. Without them uttering a word, Jesus sees their compassionate determination and commends their faith, healing the man on their behalf. The text ends noting that everyone was awed by that strange and wondrous act, by the witness of some of the earliest followers of Christ being church to one another - faithfully, hopefully, doggedly ushering those that have been marginalized and those most in need directly to Jesus' feet for healing. Faith here was not private and individual, but something corporate, something shared, a sacrificial and costly act of loving service performed for someone in need, carried out by a group of believing friends who refused to leave anyone isolated outside.

Our second reading for today comes from the book of Acts, where the author of Luke continues telling the newborn church's story in the times after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. We hear about the devoted spiritual practices that built up the church and marked them as followers of "the Way" to the rest of society. They gave generously to God through the church,

pooling what they had in common and distributing it to others as needs emerged. After last week's tragedy in the synagogue, it's important to note that this was still a largely Jewish movement; they met in the Temple for worship and prayer, service and study. They spent time together, breaking bread both ritually, as we do today in Communion, and routinely, as we often do in Fellowship Hall. In doing these things, they grew close enough to genuinely support one another in all things. They praised God and ate together with glad and generous hearts that earned the goodwill of all in society. The church grew exponentially, from 120 members to over 3,000 in the blink of an eye, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We see an example of what this looked like, of what it was to be church, to live churched lives in the generosity, fellowship, and care revealed in the story of Tabitha that we read today. First mentioned by her Aramaic name, Tabitha was a highly revered disciple that had recently died. She was a pillar of faith, devoted to good works and acts of charity, particularly supporting the most vulnerable amongst them, the widows and the poor. The new church gathered around her dead body, reeling at the loss of their friend and her ministry at church and in the broader community, where she was known by her Greek name, Dorcas. They wouldn't accept that her story was over. The church's disciples sent for Peter to come without delay. Filled with hope, they showed Peter the garments they were wearing that very day, gifts of generosity and care that Tabitha had made for them. Peter heard their weeping and prayed for Tabitha with all the power of God working through him until her eyes opened, a miracle like we don't often see today, or at least don't recognize it readily. Helping Tabitha up, Peter restored her to the saints and widows of the faithful community, leading many to believe in the God that is able to overcome even death.

These stories of the ways the first followers of Jesus behaved, of the ways the early church lived out their lives together resonate with me. They ring as true because I have known these church folk. In the wake of tragedy, Presbyterian Pastor Fred Rogers was known for reminding us to look for God at work through the helpers. Today, in sharing my story, I share the story of the helpers, which is the story of the church and of the God that has bound us to one another in love.

After being invited to worship by a neighbor, my parents joined the Presbyterian church, where I was baptized. With my parents, the church made vows to help me grow in faith, to teach me how to live a "churched" life. Over the years, they honored those vows in everything from weekly worship to Wednesday night dinners, from local youth service projects to international mission trips as a staff member. But I experienced the *full* extent of the church's love and generosity when I was in high school. Until then, I had lived a pretty charmed, drama free life. But when I was seventeen, my brothers were in a really bad car accident in another state. One of my brothers died, along with his friend, and my other brother was left with a traumatic brain injury, as a non-communicable spastic quadriplegic. My parents till care for him at home twenty years later, with the devoted love that can only flow from God. In those days, our family was shattered. We were broken, numb. The church surrounded us instantly and carried us through the days, weeks, months, years of adjusting to our new normal. A member flew us in his plane to the hospital in the next state where my surviving brother was in the ICU. As we sat in an ICU waiting room far from home, we received an outpouring of calls, cards, prayers, gifts of comfort and care, and encouraging visits from pastors, faithful friends, and even strangers. Church families who had been through similar situations shared their stories with us, giving us hope in God's presence in all things, even when our dead were not resuscitated and our quadriplegic never walked again, when healing doesn't come in the ways we expected. While we were away,

like the roof busting team of friends from Luke, a group of church members broke into our home and cleaned our house to prepare it for the many mourners that would come to attend my other brother's funeral. They poured all their love and care into every waxed floor board. Who even waxes floors these days? They did. As more needs emerged, my parents, who had generously devoted their entire lives to being the church to others, found themselves perennially on the receiving end of the church's well-coordinated care and generosity. And to my parents' credit, when they were asked what they needed, they spoke honestly. They did not hide their vulnerabilities, but invited the church to offer care for our deepest, constantly evolving, ongoing needs. Another team of roof busting friends from area churches literally busted through the back wall of our brick house to create a new, handicapped entrance. A church friend used his architectural skills to help us navigate the red tape of converting a historic home into a house with a handicapped accessible bathroom. The Tabithas of several churches in our community sewed quilts, cooked meals for a year, and provided respite care for my brother. One particular Tabitha washed our clothes and mopped the kitchen floor for over a decade, while another restored our garden and came to read to my brother weekly for over 15 years. I am not sure if I have ever been that consistent with anything. Some anonymous Tabithas bought a handicapped vehicle for my brother, while another Tabitha foresaw the expenses we would shoulder for my brother's ongoing care and filled in the gaps for my college tuition. When we were weak, the church of God was strong. We were church-ed, in the truest and holiest sense, by all those church-ed lives that surrounded us with sacrificial generosity and costly love of God, until we began to experience God's healing and regained enough strength to pass that same love of God on to others in their times of need.

Since then, over my life, I have continued to experience the church's astounding generosity and care in every congregation I have known. If you haven't been in the church for very long or haven't really immersed yourself in the ongoing life of a church community over many years, you might think my testimony of the church's generosity is unique. But as a church member turned pastor, I can assure you that I have witnessed and been a part of countless roof busting teams. I have known more Tabithas than I could possibly name in every congregation where I have worshipped and served. I bet you can name them too. It's not something we talk about a lot, perhaps out of shame of our brokenness, or humility that doesn't want the church to seem too self-congratulatory, as if we have it all together, or simply, because it is hard. But we should talk about it more, because our stories are the stories of the church, the story of God at work in the world. In my experience, these church-ed lives are the norm, meeting our brokenness with unexpected forms of healing, cultivating new life where death once reigned, echoing the early church's best model of how to be church to one another and especially to those who linger at the margins of our society. In hearing our stories, others may be encouraged to believe in the ongoing power of God at work through the church.

I am grateful for all the ways God has used you, First Pres Athens, to church me as well. You ministered to our family when I struggled with infertility, a team of Tabithas I had just met praying alongside of me at the women's retreat, sharing their own stories, following up after we got home. You invited me to fill empty days by serving the church and Athens in various ways. When we finally got pregnant, you celebrated our son Robby's arrival. When he got sick shortly after his birth, you heard my fears about his survival and where God was in the midst of all of it and you lifted us in prayer. Even when his condition dragged us down and left us isolated for many months, you still showed up, bringing meals and offering prayers and friendship. When we hadn't been able to come to church in what seemed like forever, you welcomed us back with

open arms, free from any judgment. With joyous hearts, you baptized our son and vowed to support him throughout his faith journey, vows you honor for all the children of God baptized here at this font or anywhere. And this is just my experience. You also devote yourselves to regularly gather together, welcoming anyone for worship, study, fellowship, and service. You host local homeless families at the church, foster and adopt children, buy birthday cakes for orphans and make sandwiches for day laborers. You visit the elderly with cheerful song, the sick with prayer, the hungry with food, and the grieving with holy consolation and companionship. You support a local campus ministry, where I serve, that is widely regarded as safe space for all students. You stock the local food bank as you do today, sort clothes to fund freedom for those who have been abused, give grants to local non-profits, build latrines for Hondurans, pray with AthHalf runners, and provide space for youth orchestras and those who march in the Christmas parade. You have been blessed, and you have used it to be a blessing to others. Having experienced God's incredible generosity in your own lives through the church, you, the churched ones, respond to God's provision with boundless generosity to me and to so many others in big and small ways, more numerous than the stars. And yet, in my experience, the church never stops asking what more we can do to be faithful to evolving human needs, particularly for the most vulnerable amongst us. We are able to do all this because the Spirit of God works through us, empowering us in new and awesome ways. How will you, how will we the church respond to God with renewed generosity this year?

Like any human institution, including the early church, our congregations are marred by the squabbles and failings of everyday life. But in the midst of all our humanity, the God we have known in Jesus Christ is still moving through the church, where together the faithful continue generously living out churched lives of sacred service and compassionate care for those most in need. Like Tabitha and her congregation, we are edified by worship and study, by fellowship and service. Grateful for all God has done for us through the church, we the churched continue to pool our time, talents, and tithes, so that together, the church of Jesus Christ can bust through every roof to meet the spiritual and physical needs of those in our church family and in the world beyond these doors - healing and transforming lives with the same compassion and generosity that Jesus did. Share your stories, the church's stories, that others may hear the power of God and believe. Keep choppin', churched ones. Amen.

Benediction: We have been churched, experiencing God's boundless generosity in our lives. Share your stories, for they are the stories of God still at work through the church. Go forth, extending generosity to everyone you meet in Jesus' name. And may the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit surround you, fill you, and empower you, now and forevermore. Amen.