

Sermon For: 4/21/13

By: Catherine E. Brunson

Scripture: Act 9:36–43; Psalm 23; Rev 7:9–17; John 10:22–30

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen
(Please be seated.)

Good morning!

My name is Cathy and I am an alcoholic. I want to thank Father Frank for inviting me to come to preach about recovery. Many of you may remember me from my time at St. Albans and the combined Holy Week services that our churches shared. I am honored to preach on this topic. As one of the co-chairs of our Diocesan Recovery Ministries Commission, our hope is to have a recovery service in every church in our diocese.

So why is it important to have a recovery service? Because we believe that it is time for the church at the local level to remove its blinders. Because there are people in our pews and pulpits suffering from these illnesses who need the help of their church family to accept the mercy and healing of Jesus Christ through Spirit-centered programs of recovery. Because we believe addiction is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid in recovery.

But if these are not enough reason, let us look at some statistics on addiction. What I am going to share is just the tip of the iceberg and you can easily find more facts by googling.

- An estimated 20 million Americans chronically misuse alcohol and other drugs – licit and illicit.
- Half of all auto accident deaths, approximately 28,000 a year, are alcohol related.
- One in ten of us will become chemically dependent and, with alcohol consumption, that figure is one in eight.
- One in every three families is affected by alcohol and drug misuse.
- Less than three percent of those with alcoholism fit the stereotype of “street person” or “skid row bum.” In truth, alcoholics are functioning in every profession, every trade and every parish.

Let us now take a look at our lesson from Acts. We have a story that happened after the resurrection of Jesus. The story takes place in Joppa, a rather famous port city on the Sea of Galilee. In Joppa there was a small Christian community founded by Philip. Among the believers there was a woman whose name was Tabitha, a widow. She was recognized for her devotion to good works and charity.

Tabitha died and her circle of friends summoned Peter for help, saying “Please come to us without delay.” And this is a cry that everyone in recovery has made. It is a cry we make when there is no place else to go. When we are at the bottom and do not see a way out. It is our first real cry for help and just as Peter went without delay, God comes to us without delay.

I was at that point when my boss called me into her office to tell me that she thought I had a problem with alcohol. I had just returned to work after the death of my father from this disease. My drinking had progressed to the point where I was a daily drunk consuming 5 or 6 drinks before leaving the house to go to work, and I continued to drink in the car on the way to work. I was drinking more than a quart of vodka a day. My life was in complete chaos; we were buying a bar and my sister who was dying from breast cancer was living with me. Everyone in my family knew how sick she was but to my surprise, my siblings thought that I would be the next person dead in our family and asked my spouse to get me help. They could see how bad my drinking had become, but I was not ready to admit that alcohol was my problem, even though I knew I needed help. So while my boss was talking, I was pleading for help and to my surprise these words came out of my mouth. “I don’t think I have a problem with alcohol, but I’ll tell you what I will do. I will go back to church.” It had been 25 years since I had been in church, but God knew exactly what I needed. So that next Sunday, I went back to the church I had grown up in, St. Alban here in New Brunswick.

When I walked through the doors of the church of my childhood, I was treated as if I had never left. It was a homecoming that I will never forget. Even now it emphasizes for me how God truly works through people. Their great compassion for me expressed God’s response to anyone who repents.

This acceptance back into the church is what kept me coming back. It gave me a reason to try to control how much I was drinking. But like every addict knows, control is not something that we are good at when it comes to the substance that has control over us. It took eight more months of going to church every Sunday, before I was able to admit that alcohol was my real problem.

Strange things happened in Joppa when Peter arrived on the scene. I am not sure if the people who asked him to come had a clue that Peter had the power to bring Tabitha back to life. So what happened next is beyond belief. Peter told Tabitha “to get up” after he knelt down and prayed. Tabitha opened her eyes, saw Peter and sat up. Peter then gave her his hand to help her. He then called the other widows into the room to see what had happened.

Just like the strange thing that happened in Joppa, strange things are happening in 12 step fellowships here in New Brunswick and all around the world. The laws of science as we know them are somehow being turned upside down. A woman who was hopelessly dead comes back to life. Men and women who were hopelessly addicted are given a whole new life in recovery.

Psalm 30, which we read last Sunday, was authored by someone who wasn't an alcoholic, but had experienced the un-manageability that everyone of us arrives at sooner or later. He cries out, “Help me, dear God; I am frightened and have lost my way. You came to me in the darkness; you breathed life into my bones. You plucked me from the abyss; you healed me and made me whole. You lifted me up from death and clothed me with the joy of your presence.”

After I entered the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous, my life started to turn around. I truly had been plucked from the abyss, God removed the compulsion to drink from me and I was able to start living the life that God had planned for me. Things started happening so fast that I felt like I was on a roller coaster going up and down not knowing when the next cliff or turn was coming. I was no longer in control of my life. I had become willing to turn my life over to the care of God as I understood Him.

I needed to completely change everything. I was three weeks into recovery when my husband moved out with a woman he met in the bar we had just bought. I went through a divorce and lost my house, the bar and a boat. Yet, three years after I entered into recovery, I was accepted into the deacon formation program. You see, God is merciful and desires our restoration more than anything. I was given the ability to complete the formation program and now have served as a deacon in this diocese for eleven years.

My story, like the story of everyone in recovery, was once looked upon as failure and death, but put into God's hands becomes new life. It becomes the story of resurrection.

What happened in Joppa may be one of the most important stories for the Church. First, it's a story of resurrection that takes place after the resurrection of Jesus. It is symbolic of the fact that the power of resurrection continues for believers who follow after Jesus. Resurrection keeps going and going and going!

Secondly, it is Peter, a follower of Jesus, who becomes God's agent of healing and power to restore Tabitha back to life. This indicates that Jesus' disciples have the same power Jesus had. Like the healing stories and miracles that Jesus performed, they keep going.

No one knows why Tabitha died. Her resurrection however provided yet another living witness of the power of God and the continued ministry of Jesus. Just as the story of Easter gives the faithful hope for the future, the story of Tabitha gives us hope also. God continued to intervene in the life of the faithful in Joppa and God will continue to intervene in the lives of the faithful here.

None of us are physically dead, yet like the addicted all of us suffer from some death that makes us hopeless, apathetic, bitter or living in despair. Some find themselves in a funk, unwilling to care. Others are overwhelmed by the burdens of life wondering if they can go on. Still others are filled with fear, worried about what will happen next.

The resurrection of Tabitha gives us hope. The faith of her circle of friends reminds us of the need to work, pray and fellowship together. Tabitha's devotion to charity and good works reminds us of the mission to which we have been called. The faith of Peter demonstrates the intervening presence of God to act among us. Faith in God can resurrect us from those areas in our lives where we have lost our energy and our way. When God's power is at work in us, nothing is impossible. God's power can pull us out of our addictions, as if from death, and give us new life in Jesus Christ.

Tabitha's story is our story. We keep getting second chances. The same God who brought life from death for her still brings life from death. God is still in the resurrection business, even mine, even yours.

Amen.