

April 21, 2013
Acts 9:36-43
“Dorcas’ Circle”

The Rev. Peter Cook

In the book of Acts, we learn about a woman named Dorcas. Dorcas was much loved. Dorcas devoted her life to good works and charity. Sadly, however, she had fallen ill and died.

So, in their grief, the other women who were Dorcas’ friends washed her and carefully laid her on her bed in a room upstairs. And, then they called on Peter to come and offer his healing prayers. And, as Peter stood there and prayed, the other women gathered in a circle to pray with Peter, dressed in the clothing which Dorcas had made for them. They stood there weeping and praying in solidarity with their beloved Dorcas.

In the face of grief, a circle of healing was created. And, as they stood in a circle and prayed around her bed and then outside her door as Peter did his healing work, the story goes that Dorcas was raised to new life. Circles. Circles of healing. Circles of prayer. Circles of fellowship. Circles of companionship. Circles of justice. All bring life in the face of death.

Throughout our country in local churches, you will from time to time happen on a Dorcas Circle. Dorcas Circles seek to mirror the virtues of Dorcas in their care for each other and for the world. A Dorcas Circle can sound a little old fashioned, perhaps.

Such a circle can seem to come from a different time and place. It’s the sort of gathering which we might discover on a cold winter Tuesday morning in a remote church basement in some community far away from the urban, hip, and up-to-date church of the new age. But, caring and community is really a timeless idea which serves as a strong counter point to the often violent, media saturated, self-centered culture in which we dwell.

Dorcas Circles are old-fashioned indeed, but we have a need more than ever to create circles of caring and love, which gather around those who are suffering and grieving, and offer the promise of new life. I must confess that this beautiful picture of community and new life offered in Acts very quickly receded from my mind as my consciousness was filled by the many images of tragedy, suffering, political complicity, and violence we have witnessed this week.

A fertilizer plant in West Texas exploded leaving so many people dead. That plant had not been inspected in at least five years by the understaffed OSHA and was cited with multiple safety violations in 2006.

In another part of Texas, Eric Williams was finally apprehended and charged with capital murder. Williams shot dead District Attorney Mike McLelland and his wife, Cynthia, along an Assistant Prosecutor in the same office, Mark Hasse.

The United States Senate, even after heavy lobbying from the families who lost loved ones in Newtown, Connecticut to gun violence, and lobbying from many other families mourning the loss of over 3000 loved ones to gun violence since Newtown, and an 88% approval rate from the American public, could not seem to muster the votes to pass even a basic bill to

expand background checks for gun purchases. Such a bill would have narrowed the chances that a misguided person could obtain a gun.

The Senate, in the process, managed to re-victimize a whole lot of suffering people and further encourage our culture of violence. All these stories of sadness, violence, and injustice would have been too much to handle in their own right. But, then we add to all of this the terrible tragedy in Boston.

Two incredibly lost young men detonated two bombs fashioned out of pressure cookers. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and his brother, Tamerlan, slaughtered Lingzi Lu, a Chinese graduate student at Boston University. They slaughtered Krystle Campbell, who was getting her business degree. They slaughtered Martin Richard, who was only 8 years old. And, when it was over they murdered Sean Collier, a young officer at MIT who had just graduated from the police academy.

They also severely wounded an officer on the MBTA. In addition, so many people lost their limbs and had their lives permanently altered. These two brothers went on to hold up a Seven Eleven before they found themselves engaged in a gun fight where the older brother died after being run over by a car. And on Friday, they finally apprehended the younger brother who had crawled into a boat and was bleeding after being shot in the neck.

So much pain, so much grief, so many families and friends who are drowning in their tears. With all these images of suffering, violence, complicity with violence, and political avoidance swirling in my head, I did, however, manage to return to the image of those women standing with Peter to raise Dorcas to new life.

Indeed, I think that these are the images of life and love that need to be held up to the world right now. What the world needs is a Dorcas Circle. A whole bunch of Dorcas Circles. Millions and millions of Dorcas Circles. You found more than a few of those circles of healing and compassion in Boston this week.

Nancy Taylor, The Senior Minister at Old South Church in Boston, said at the interfaith service of healing that she watched from the tower of Old South what took place on the street below. Right after the bombs went off, she saw hundreds of people not running away from the scene.

Instead, she saw hundreds of people moving towards the bomb site, gathering in various circles to immediately care for the wounded. First responders were throwing tourniquets on people who were deeply wounded. EMTs, police officers, firemen and women, marathon medics, and private citizens of all ages, were all offering their healing care where just a minute before, the bombs had been detonated.

The world tells us that people are selfish, self-centered and violent. The bombs and the men who planted them are emblematic of that seeming truth. But, the picture of that EMT who saved a young woman's life by binding up her wounds offers an equally powerful image of life in the face of death.

Dorcas Circles all around offering the resurrection promise that caring, love, community, and justice will prevail in the face of death. Geoffrey Black, the president of the United Church

of Christ, said it well this week. "Oh God, help us respond to this harsh reality of these times with the firm resolve of love. For we know that only love will overcome fear and hatred."

In Acts, with love in his heart, Peter told the world about how Dorcas was brought back to life. He showed this picture of new life in the face of death to all the saints and widows.

In our time, as people of the risen Christ who conquered the death dealing powers in this world, we must be compelled to ask this question: how is it that we will create together the beloved community bringing forth God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

How will we proclaim the power of Jesus' resurrection in our words and actions? Through our baptisms, we made that promise right. If we were baptized as babies, our parents stood up and they promised to put Jesus at the center of their life and to raise us in the Christian faith. Our parents promised to tell us the stories of our faith. And, they promised to show us right from wrong.

They promised to teach us to counter the forces of evil and sin in the world. In baptism, we died to sin and we were raised to new life.

Today, we baptized Jeanine Hoyenski, who made that promise to put Jesus at the center of her life and to follow in his ways.

And, when we baptized Jeanine today, each of us also promised to walk with her in the Jesus way.

The lifelong purpose of a Christian is to figure out how to live into our baptisms in powerful ways. Everyone in this congregation this morning is going to work out that question of how to follow Jesus and offer life in the face of death in a different way.

But, let us resolve to be like those women surrounding Dorcas on her death bed to do our very best to offer life and love in the face of death. How can each one individually and all of us collectively live into our baptisms and offer the care which is required?

In this church and in the world, there is someone in the hospital right now. Living into our baptism and offering our care means coming to pray for that person in need. At times, we can also be an advocate for that suffering person as they navigate through the maze of medical procedures and complications.

In this congregation and our world, there is someone confined to their home. They may find it hard to move, and they are in pain and feel alone. Living into our baptism and offering our care means delivering a meal, writing a card, and offering some companionship.

In this congregation and in our world, there is someone in their home who is struggling with a divorce. Living into our baptism and offering pastoral care means coming to listen, and to help people navigate through the darkness. In this congregation and in our world, there is someone with a broken heart who lost a loved one to gun violence, or witnessed a gun related tragedy, and weeps every day.

Living into your baptism and offering care means being there to bind up the wounds. And, part of that pastoral care could mean standing up to the culture of violence that so pervades

this country by calling up our congressman and applying the necessary political pressure on them to make guns less accessible.

In this congregation and in our world, someone is holding their breath worrying that the latest reign of terror will offer yet another occasion for some emotionally disturbed and racist person to perpetuate an act of violence against an innocent person of a certain nationality or religion different than their own. Living into our baptism and offering our care means reminding the world that terror and violence in any form is wrong and is an equal opportunity visitor to people of all nationalities and faiths. Let us remind the world that people of every race and religion are against such things and so deeply grieve all that took place in Boston.

Gracious God, through our baptisms, may we redouble our efforts to create Dorcas Circles of love, compassion, and justice to offer life in the face of death. In many ways, I think could find some solace in these words offered by another Bostonian, Robert Kennedy, who many years ago, on the occasion of Martin Luther King Jr.'s death at the hands of a white man, offered these pastoral words of comfort and resolve: "we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond these rather difficult times".

My favorite poet is Aeschylus. He once wrote: "Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God." What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black. And, then he concludes saying "let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world".