

Sermon 5-11-25

Paul Purdue preaching

We stood at the front of the church, mom's photo resting on an easel next to the small cedar box our friend Ross had made to hold her cremains. The line of people stretched out the back of the sanctuary into the vestibule. As I surveyed the line, two women in white sweatshirts stood out. Who wears a sweatshirt to a funeral? It was strange but mom made friends everywhere. When the guests in athletic wear made it to the front of the line, I knew immediately mom had painted those sweatshirts for them. In bold primary colors mom recorded icons, images and inside jokes from their shared vocation as teachers. Each sweatshirt was a hand painted blessing, a word of encouragement, an invitation to hang in there teaching the city's most often overlooked school. Her younger colleagues told us how "Purdy's, mom's school nickname, life overflowed with hope, good works and good humor.

Tabatha's line of widows stretched out the door. The mourners carried and wore the headscarves, tunics, aprons, and robes Tabitha had sewn for them. They carried with them the stories of Tabitha's life. Together, they recalled how Tabitha had seen them, seen their need and made them a gift, woven by loving hands.

The most vulnerable people in Joppa brought the stories of the handmade garments Tabitha had created for them. If you can remember back to Palm Sunday, we talked about how many people in the ancient world generally owned only one change of clothes. People patched and repaired clothes wearing them every day for years. We shared how Exodus 22 mandated that if you took a neighbor's coat to secure a loan, you must return it before sunset and then asked: "*How will your neighbor keep warm, if you keep their coat?*". This line of widows carrying the tunics, coats and scarves tells us that Tabitha was likely a person with some resources, after all she has an upper room. John Wesley believed that "*in the hands of the righteous money is an excellent gift of God, answering the noblest ends. In the hands of God's children, it is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, clothing for the ragged. It gives the stranger a place to lay their head. By money we may supply the place of a spouse to the widow, and a provider to the orphaned. We may be a defense for the oppressed, a means of health to the sick... eyes to the blind, as feet to the lame; yea, a lifter up from the gates of death!*" (John Wesley's Sermon: The Use of Money). The question for us, who like Tabitha have enough for ourselves, might be will our lives overflow with good works or will we stockpile more stuff for ourselves?

Widows, orphans and single mothers were some of the most vulnerable people in the ancient patriarchy. Tabitha had loving measured and crafted garments custom fitted to their lines, curves and lengths. As a loving pastor, Peter listens as they stand around her bedside, weeping and showing the clothing Dorcas had made for them while she was with them. What gifts will people bring when they come to the church to pay their last respects for your life? What stories will they share as they stand in line at the celebration of your life? Will they celebrate all you owned or what you gave away? Will

they say *"they gave to the poor, their benevolence endures forever"*? (2 Corinthians 9) Will they tell 3ith healing tears how your *"life overflowed with good works?"*

Tejana poet Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros writes, *"I believe our hands complicate time. If we're lucky enough, they help carry on the stories of our (ancestors). This is why we write, knit, compose, cook, and so much more. We are all each a sacred text."*

In Abuelita Faith, What Women on the Margins Teach us About Wisdom, Persistence and Strength, Kat Armas writes, *"The art of making or creating has always been more than just a physical craft; it has served spiritual purposes as well. With (sewing), both the mind and the hands think and design. It's an embodied experience that involves the spiritual disciplines of remaining focused, present, and engaged. Creating with our hands also involves the art of remembering. It is a way that we tell stories about ourselves and our communities. This process invites the artist to take an inward journey moving the body to rhythms of the earth. This sacred activity is one of co-creation, of connecting to the divine through the earth's gifts that are given us; it is an intrinsic form of spiritual knowledge that is carried from generation to generation."*

There's something beautiful, personal, powerful and incarnational about tailoring a garment to fit someone exactly, draping the tape around someone's shoulders, arms, hips and neck. Handcrafting is an act of love, connecting us to our belovedness as we release that God-given creativity into the world.

When the passage stumped me this week, Hunter Wade suggested that I read Kat Armas. Kat reminded me how the Creator of the Universe made clothing for Adam and Eve. After they broke the rules, and shame entered Paradise, Adam and Eve hid behind fig leaves. God spun yarn, cured leather, measured their curves, designed patterns and sewed clothing for Adam and Eve, the mother of all the living. Did God add a label reading "created by God"? The Psalmist versifies: *"Oh Lord you know me, you knit me together in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth."* (Psalm 139) We are made in the image of our God who lovingly made clothes for hurting people, who like us.

The writers took about ten chapters in Exodus to describe the spinners, weavers, silversmiths, seamstresses, carpenters, masons, painters, jewelers, and architects who created the first Tabernacle. *"So they came, both men and women; with a willing heart bringing brooches and earrings and signet rings and pendants, all sorts of gold objects, everyone bringing an offering of gold to the Lord. And everyone who possessed blue or purple or crimson yarn or fine linen or goats' hair or tanned rams' skins or fine leather brought them... All the skillful women spun with their hands and brought what they had spun in blue and purple and crimson yarns and fine linen; all the women whose hearts moved them to use their skill spun the yarn. ... Then Moses named the lead architect, "See, the Lord has called Bezalel... and God filled all of them with a divine spirit, with ability, intelligence, and knowledge, and with every kind of skill, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving*

wood, in every kind of artistic craft. And God inspired every skilled worker and designer to teach and create as artisans, designers, embroiderers, and weavers—by any sort of artistic craft .” (35-36 adapted).

God cares about art. God creates artists. God inspires art. God uses artists and artisans to inspire and guide us. There is a kind of worship when we craft music, make art, tend a garden, build a deck, or design an app, with our heads, hearts and hands. When I invest the time, sitting with Scripture, digesting the text, abiding with it, risking hearing from it, listening for the Word of God (that Hebrews 4 tells us is living and active- piercing first my soul), chatting with a clergy colleague and then reading an author they suggest, reading the commentaries to double check the Word I think I am heard, and crafting a sermon with honesty and humility so that my typing becomes a prayerful attempt to breathe in the divine spirit, if I do all that: I engage in a deep deep therapy. When such prayerful sermon crafting happens, it is no longer work, but privilege and prayer. In a world of machines, AI, cubicles, fast fashion and frozen diners perhaps we are missing out on something God created us to do: work with our hands, ruminate in our heads, open hearts and make with our bodies. Maybe hand-making, cooking, composing, gardening, building, whittling, and weaving, are restorative practices the Creator created us to do. Maybe God’s Holy Spirit is awakened within us as we when we use our hands to create?

So what are you creating? How is God flowing through your hands? What are you giving away? The widows brought the things Tabitha had made in remembrance of her life. What stories will your friends, family, co-workers, neighbors, widows, orphans and immigrants tell as they celebrate your life? Tabitha’s story points us to Christ, the Resurrection and the Life. Her healing speaks of God’s power and the witness of her life, perhaps both brought her back to her community for a season, so she might once again give away her life in service and love, crafting more garments and stories. Like Tabitha, may we use our hands to create and give, and may our lives overflow with good works. Amen.