

Living with a Saint

from the pulpit of
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Acts 9:36-43

³⁶Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. ³⁷At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. ³⁸Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, “Please come to us without delay.” ³⁹So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.

⁴⁰Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, “Tabitha, get up.” Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. ⁴¹He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. ⁴²This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. ⁴³Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

We almost don't even notice him. And why would we? He's not a main character. I'm not even sure he's a minor character. He's more like a stage prop. He seems to be a nearly insignificant footnote in the wider story of the early apostolic ministry.

But first, we encounter Peter this morning, who by this point has already been filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, healed broken bodies, and preached with boldness.

In fact, by the fifth chapter of Acts, Peter has become so well known that people are desperate to just have his shadow pass over them, so that they might be blessed.

While traveling in his ministry, Peter is approached by neighboring disciples who share the unfortunate news that a beloved member of the community named Tabitha has died, he wastes no time in going to her.

Clearing the room, he says a quick prayer and commands her to get up. Tabitha comes back to life. Peter then calls all the others to bear witness to what has happened. By the power of Christ Jesus, Peter, on top of everything else he's already done, can also bring back the dead. Well good for Peter.

It's in this context that we first hear his name. V.43 reads, "Meanwhile, [Peter] stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner." The Interpreter's Bible Dictionary makes only a small note of Simon, highlighting his profession as a tanner as one being "odious to the Jews because of the necessity of handling dead bodies."¹

Simon the tanner only shows up two more times in all of Scripture. Both in Acts. Both in reference to housing Peter. That's it. That's all we hear of him. Or know of him. That his name was Simon. That he was a tanner. And that he lived with a Saint.

¹ *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 4, R-Z, "Simon," (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962) 357.

Mark and I shared a room for two years in the Kappa Delta Rho house our junior and senior year of college. Now Mark was the student body president, a member of the college choir, and had interned for our US Senator. He was very well liked on campus.

His personality was larger than life. He could tell wonderful stories, and was quick witted with a hilarious sense of humor. He had a contagious and full-bellied laugh that echoed throughout the house. And he was, without fail, always the life of the party. Because of all that, I hated him a little bit.

Unlike the Apostle Peter however, Mark was terrified of his own shadow, and on more than one occasion put me in harm's way so that he could escape the danger.

Yet he was magnetic and charming. Expressive and over-the-top. While he was no saint, many of us felt somehow boosted by his presence. And I recognized that I was being shaped by my proximity to him.

I found myself wanting to be more involved in campus activities, and becoming more engaged in organizational leadership. I came to recognize the power of the storyteller. Mark's character and passions were influencing my own. My friendship with him was affecting how I engaged the world around me.

What does it mean to live with someone like that? Or to encounter someone who seems grounded in a different kind of reality? What did it mean for Simon the tanner?

What does it mean when we interact with Spirit-filled people in our own daily living? Does it affect us? Do we allow it to affect us?

Some of you may have wondered whether the title of my sermon this morning, *Living with a Saint*, meant I was going to preach about my marriage.

And while I can assure you that Abby is way better than I deserve, I'm inviting us to think even broader than our spouses or partners.

I'm asking if we are willing, not only to identify, but to be shaped by the holiness that we discover in other people?

Who are the people that make us want to be better than we are? And what is it about their lives that sparks joy in our own?

New York Times columnist David Brooks writes in his recently published book, *The Second Mountain*, about folks who have climbed life's first mountain of academic achievement, career success, or social capital. Ascending towards the peak of culture's apex. But then something happens.

Maybe it's a fall from the top, or a tragedy, a season of suffering, or a slow awareness that awakens in them the burning question: Is this all there is? So these folks begin to climb a second mountain, where the goals and values are markedly different than the first.

Their lives begin to turn in another direction. They begin to show signs of what Brooks calls a "settled resolve" and they live into deep commitments to a cause, family, community, or a faith. They are not always put-together. They get exhausted and stressed. But they radiate joy. They glow with an inner-light.

Contrasting the self-centered nature of modern society to the second mountain of self-giving, Brooks writes, "Individualism thrives in the prosaic world, the world of career choices and worldly accomplishment. The second-mountain says, No, this is an enchanted world, a moral and emotional drama. Individualism accepts and assumes self-interest. The second-mountain ethos says that a worldview that focuses on self-interest doesn't account for the full amplitude of the human person."

Brooks goes on to note, “We are capable of great acts of love that self-interest cannot fathom, and murderous acts of cruelty that self-interest cannot explain. Individualism says, The main activities of life are buying and selling. But the Second Mountain says, No, the main activity of life is giving. Human beings at their best are givers of gifts.”²

I suspect many of us know people whom Brooks is describing. Some of you here might be among the saints that we identify. I’ve seen the way your passions inspire others.

The way your joy has radiated and then like wildfire, begins to burn in other’s hearts. From hunger initiatives to refugee resettlement and beyond, I’ve been amazed at how deeply our members care about the world.

I’d also suspect that no one makes it on our list of saints because of what they believe. The most attractive quality about those who radiate joy is rarely their opinions or doctrinal stances, but the way their joy leads to action.

I’m not sure I am on anyone’s list. I will be the first to admit that I have to work hard to live into joy sometimes. I don’t always radiate it. I’m much better at complaining than rejoicing.

Some people are glass half-full people, I’m more of a “I bet the glass has been poisoned” kind of person. My realism borders on pessimism. But I’d be lying if I said that my vocation as a minister hasn’t shaped me to see the world with more joy and beauty, depth and drama.

In an essay directed towards those in ordained ministry or those considering it, United Church of Christ minister, Martin Copenhaver, writes, “Being a pastor has made me better than I am. That is because the pastoral vocation requires that I act in ways that seem beyond me.”

² David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life*, (New York: Random House, 2019) 52-53.

He then tells a story about something that happened early in his ministry. In 1985, Tom Cullins, the son of church members, was among the 152 passengers on an airplane that was hijacked and rerouted to Beirut. There they were held hostage by members of a terrorist organization until being released seventeen days later.

Upon initially hearing the news of the hijacking, Copenhaver immediately heads to the members' home, gathering with their other immediate family to await more news.

He writes, "I stayed for hours as they made phone calls, watched the news, and awaited word. The situation seemed grim, to say the least...Sitting in the Cullins family's living room on that anxious first day, I was keenly aware that I didn't know what to do.

So, for the most part, I just sat there in silence. Which might seem appropriate under the circumstances, but which also seemed entirely necessary to me because I didn't know what to say.

Then, after the family received a few more frightening details about Tom's situation, his mother turned to her young pastor and said, 'Martin, this is where you offer a prayer.'

It was part instruction, and part demand. Everyone else in the room may find it difficult to pray on such a day, but for me that simply was not an option. I was the pastor, and I was expected to pray. And so I did."

He goes on to say, "As a pastor, you cannot opt out of prayer. You cannot say, 'I'd rather pass, if you don't mind. I don't have the words today. Is there someone else you can ask instead?' At any given moment you may not be expected to *feel* particularly prayerful, but, by golly, you are expected to offer a prayer anyway."³

³ Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wonderous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009) 58-59.

I'd argue you need not be an ordained minister to be called to be better than you are. The Christian faith has always called us to be better. We are shaped by our discipleship in Jesus Christ to be more; more merciful, more just, more loving, more selfless.

John Calvin says, "Our religion will be unprofitable, if it does not change our heart, pervade our manners, and transform us into new creatures."⁴

He's right, you know. There's no point in being here Sunday after Sunday after Sunday if we are not being transformed by God. If we aren't being challenged to let go of our bitterness; to forgive more; to offer grace where wrath might suffice; to guard our tongue when lashing out would feel better; to be gentle with our strength; to move from beliefs to action.

We remember, Peter started out as a fisherman. He ends up being the first bishop of Rome and is martyred there. But we have no idea how Simon the tanner's story ends. For all we know he could have kept right on turning animal skins into leather for the rest of his days. Not giving a second thought on his time housing heaven's famous porter.

Might be just as well. How many of us have spent much time thinking about Simon? He's not even a minor character. More like a stage prop. But I suspect he ended up being much more than a prop in God's story. We are all much more than mere props in God's story.

If we're paying attention, and if we are willing, we too can be shaped and challenged and transformed by the lives of those who radiate God's deep passions and divine imagination for the world.

And who knows, our own St. Peter might be coming just around the corner. Amen.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Golden Booklet of the True Christian Life*, (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1952) 21.