



Works of Life

Acts 9:36-43; John 10:22-30

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If you came to church any given Friday, you would be welcomed by the stitching sound of sewing machines, female voices chasing back and forth, and laughter. You would find our Al Lien Hall transformed into an assembly line: you would see people hard at work measuring, cutting, and sewing fabric together making the most colorful and warm quilts to be blessed and shipped overseas wherever needed through the coordination of Lutheran World Relief.

(Often, when natural disasters strike or war drives families from their homes, people spend years in open fields or refugee camps. Quilts can be used as warm bedding, simple tents, or floor coverings. Each one reflects God's loving presence in a world rife with suffering. LWR distributed its first quilts in 1945 to families in war-torn Europe following the Second World War. Within a decade, the ministry was reaching around the globe to villages far removed from the world's attention. Today, an average of 300,000 quilts are lovingly given worldwide each year.¹)

After sharing workspace and time to do "good work and acts of charity" (Acts 9:36), the ladies share cake and coffee. Whenever I can take a quick break, I join them for a laughter or an update on those who are traveling or missing from the group for any reason.

Acts 9 tells us the short story of Tabitha, a disciple of Jesus. "She was devoted to good works and acts of charity." Upon her unexpected death, the local disciples send for Peter who happens to be in a nearby town. The disciples demonstrate great faith in calling Peter: they have no doubt that he can raise Tabitha from the dead.

As he reaches the house, he finds mourners showing off all the tunics and other artifacts of love that she had made to help the poor. The imperfect verb *epoiei* in 9:36 suggests that Tabitha was constantly involved in ministering to others. A literal translation of 9:36b reads like this, "she was full of good deeds and alms which she continually did." The mention of alms possibly implies that she was a person of means. Luke's suggestion that the widows showed Peter the robes and other garments Tabitha made for them also highlights her ability to care for them financially and her commitment to serving them. Her life is celebrated by a loving community who acknowledged and validated her ministry.

Many of our people are remembered that way, for their love of the poor!

Peter sends everybody out of the room and then calls Tabitha back to life. The story of Peter resuscitating Tabitha from the dead parallels the story of Jairus' daughter in Luke 8:40-56. It is

¹ <https://lwr.org/quilts>

as if Peter, who was present when Jesus raised the child, replicates a similar miracle at Joppa. The miracles performed by the Church in the book of Acts are in continuity with the ministry of Jesus. That ministry has been entrusted to us.

In today's gospel, the evangelist John tells us that it is winter and the time of the Festival of the Dedication and Jesus is walking and teaching in the Portico of Solomon where he found shelter from the cold winter winds and quiet from the noise coming from other parts of the Temple. Why is this important for us to know? What association is John making?

The Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, is celebrated in early December for eight days and nights. (Jewish families gather to say prayers and light candles on a special candelabra called a menorah. Special holiday foods are prepared and served, songs are sung, games are played, and gifts are exchanged.)

History teaches us that the Greek-Syrian King Antiochus Epiphanes, ruled over Palestine from 175 to 165 BCE. As a ruler he was best known for his encouragement of Greek culture and institutions. According to ancient records, King Antiochus IV "compelled the Jews to dissolve the laws of their country, to keep their infants uncircumcised, and to sacrifice swine's flesh upon the altar,"² spilling its blood on the holy scrolls of Scripture.

As a result of a severe persecution and pagan oppression, a group of four Jewish brothers led by Judah Maccabee decided to raise up an army of religious freedom fighters. These men of fierce faith and loyalty to God became known as the Maccabees. The small band of warriors fought for three years with "strength from heaven" until achieving a miraculous victory and deliverance from Greco-Syrian control.³

After decisively expelling the Greeks from the Land, Judah led his men to Jerusalem to restore the Holy Temple to its sacred use, which the Greeks had discontinued. They were met by a sorry sight: broken walls, overgrown courtyards, and pagan idols in God's home. Clean up and restoration work of the Temple complex started immediately. Upon termination of all the work, the Temple was rededicated to the Lord in 165.

Hanukkah is called the Feast of Dedication because it celebrates the Maccabees' victory over Greek oppression and the rededication of the Temple. But Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of Lights, and this is because God provided another miracle.

In the Temple, the eternal flame of God was to stay lit at all times as a symbol of God's presence. As far back as the time of Exodus we hear how the people were instructed to "keep a flame burning perpetually" (Exodus 27:19-20; 30:7-8; 40:24-25).

But according to tradition, when the Temple was rededicated, there was only enough oil left to burn the flame for one day. The rest of the oil had been defiled by the Greeks during their invasion, and it would take a week for new oil to be processed and purified. However, the Maccabees were moved by faith and lit the eternal flame anyhow. Miraculously, God's Holy presence caused the flame to burn for eight days until the new sacred oil was ready for use. Yahweh is known as a God of abundance. God is trusted as a God who provides.

² [Flavius Josephus](#), *The War of the Jews*, Book 1.1 §2

³ [What Is the Feast of Dedication? A Christian Viewpoint \(learnreligions.com\)](#)

As a Jew, Jesus participated in the Feast of Dedication and enjoyed the national celebration that honored not only its freedom-fighters and independence from foreign rule but also a generous and ever-present God who sides with the oppressed.

Like the presence of God expressed through the eternal flame burning in the Temple, Jesus is the incarnate, physical expression of God's presence, the Light of the World, who came to dwell among us and give us the eternal light of God's life.

But his identity was not clear to all. Jesus has been in Jerusalem since his arrival for the Feast of Booths in early October (Jn 7:10), teaching regularly in the temple complex. His teaching evokes much discussion concerning his identity, origins, and authority, and results in a division among the people. Some believe that he is the Messiah, and others believe that he is demon-possessed, or worse, a blasphemer who deserves to die (7:40-44; 8:48, 59).

In this text, Jesus is confronted by people who ask him about his identity, but do not accept his answer. They ask but are not ready to listen. They are ready to welcome the Messiah, but they have their own idea and expectations of what the Messiah would look and sound like. They have their minds already made up about who Jesus is and is not, and any further reply, and further clarification would simply contradict their opinion. They set themselves up for conflict and are not ready and willing to embrace a new teaching, a new perspective.

I can imagine the frustration he must have felt when his identity was questioned again. I can hear Jesus say. "What more can I do to prove myself to you? I have told you and you do not believe. I have shown it to you through my actions and you refute what you have seen. Others accept me for who I am and act accordingly, and even their example is denied."

One, not even Jesus, cannot argue people into faith with convincing words. It is only with the eyes of faith that one can see the truth concerning Jesus. Those who belong to Jesus, who hear and recognize his voice, follow him.

The Jewish leadership should be familiar with the language of the shepherd king already announced in Ezekiel (34 and 37). That reference should reveal Jesus as the true Messiah of the people of God, who gathers and leads the sheep to a new pasture for life eternal. But those who don't believe him don't want to get to know him and be known by him. Consequently, they can't really hear his voice and are not interested in listening to his invitation to follow him. He is the Light of the world, but they have preferred the darkness (Jn 8:12; see also Jn 1:1-5.11).

The Good Shepherd tells us that everything depends on belonging to him. Never does our status before God depend on how we feel, on having the right experience, on being free of doubt, or on what we accomplish. It depends on one thing only: that we know the shepherd and are known by him: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish" (John 10:28).

The eternal life Jesus is talking about is not a promise of immortality but of blessings overflowing in the intimate relationship with God who is eternal. Jesus will explain later: "this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3). In his light we will never be lost. Eternal life comes with an internal compass and a protection plan: we can't get lost, and no lie will lead us away.

Let us live in his light. That's where the works of life happen. Amen.